DICKENS AND MYSTERY

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Dickens and Mystery.

This thesis examines the role of mystery in the later Dickens. Primarily, it is concerned with defining the role of mystery in Dickensian narrative and reading these texts in the context of ideas of mystery, narrative and detection. The thesis deals with all of Dickens's novels from *Bleak House* to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, excluding *Hard Times*. *Bleak House* is Dickens's first coherent, planned novel of urban mystery. It also follows Dickens's journalistic works on the detective police force and a number of other urban mysteries of the 1840's. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is chosen because it is Dickens's most overtly mysterious text and marks an early point in the development of detective fiction. *Hard Times* is omitted because, while it contains an element of crime, its didactic plot is not mystery orientated. Also, *Hard Times* is not set in London.

A consistent reading will show that considerations of mystery and mystery plotting are an essential aspect of Dickensian narrative and the interpretation of Dickens's work. Dickens's interest in urban mystery will be emphasised, along with his fascination with other significant mysteries, including mysteries of the self, the mind and identity, and of providence. A general movement from mystery as represented through specific institutions to a diffusion of mystery will be noted, as well as the growing significance of psychological mystery. However, this study is cautious of a strictly linear or progressive view of artistic or generic development, preferring always productive complexities and the interplay of generic impulses to categorisation.

This thesis will assist in the placement of Dickens and mystery in the development of Victorian mystery and the formation of detective fiction. It will formulate and put into practise definitions connected with narratology and mystery.

Finally, it will affirm that mystery, traditionally undervalued or dismissed as being outside of serious critical concerns, should instead be treated as an essential aspect of reading and interpreting Dickens, thereby adding to our overall appreciation of the richness and complexity of his work.

1. Laying The Ground.

"The solution of a mystery is always less impressive than the mystery itself. Mystery has something of the supernatural about it, and even of the divine; its solution, however, is always tainted by the sleight of hand."

— Borges, "Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth."

1.1. Reading for Mystery.

To read is to pursue a mystery. From word to word and chapter to chapter, the reader seeks to close a semiotic gap — to comprehend a text that presents itself at first as an enigma: unknown and uninterpreted. This is a work primarily concerned with strategies of reading. My aim is to read certain of Dickens's later novels through an apprehension of mystery, and to affirm that mystery should not be undervalued simply as a technique leading to mere mechanical or populist suspense, but is a mode of perception and interest integrated with Dickens's most important artistic concerns. Naturally, every word is mysterious because it is a fragment of code. Beyond semantics, the reader must apply his or her knowledge of grammar to the sentence to make it bear meaning, and similarly our knowledge of narrative must be brought to paragraphs, chapters, books and entire volumes, in order that they may be interpreted[1]. The act of reading engages not only our knowledges of the codes in which the text is rendered, and our knowledge of the world, but also our imagination. We forge ahead, speculate, guess, form judgements, condemn or applaud, admire, or mourn, or wonder. Reading is a mysterious act because we are, in the dominion of the narrator, acolytes of the ritual, seekers of knowledge pursuing a hidden, promised truth. As Martin Kayman observes:

> The narrator exercises power on the reader at the beginning of his tale by letting the latter know that there is a mystery, a knowledge (a story) to be told. The nature of that mystery is not of course necessarily religious or metaphysical, but syntactic — in the sense in which Todorov identifies the 'poetics of prose' as a mystery of predication. Every narrative gesture generates syntagmatic gaps by

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[1]. See Brooks 3-4, for more detail. Brooks notes that narrative is a kind of master code for the apprehension and transmission of story.

> revealing that it is concealing what it knows, opening up, in place of an immediate totalising predicate, a space which the act of reading is driven to fill with hypothetical continuations. These gaps are 'mysterious' because they are not absolute absences; they represent knowledges known to the (ideal) author but as yet concealed from the reader until they are filled by the rest of the text. We keep on turning the page as we follow the sequences which eventually foreclose the promiscuous alternatives of predication towards a coherent meaning. (11)

To read is to enter the syntagmatic gap which Kayman identifies. Indeed, the reader enters and imaginatively creates the internal territory of the text. This familiar act of personal creativity is at the core of the mystery of reading.

The sensation when reading of becoming totally immersed in the text, of engaging with the imagined world to the near exclusion of the actual world, is one of the great pleasures of reading. This sense of total participation is often strongly grounded in the techniques of mystery. The drawing power of imaginative fiction arises out of the engagement that relies on our sense of the quest, on our hunger for discovery. In pursuit of the Gaffer, in the company of Mr Inspector, we find ourselves standing on the edge of the Thames, with the slick, slimy stones underfoot and the wild, storm-wracked clouds overhead. We are not analytically divided from this kind of text but engaged in its processes. Unravelling the clues in the labyrinth of the imagined world is part of the sheer thrill of reading, of the reader's participation in the text. This will suggest the initial impulse of this study. Dickens's popularity and his enduring readerly appeal may be an extension of this kind of relationship between the text and its pleasure. If we are to understand the narrative art of Charles Dickens, the appeal of his mysteries, the fascination of the urban labyrinth that his works continuously reiterate, we must understand his employment of mystery.

This kind of reading was first suggested by the possibility of a productive application of the ideas of detection and detective fiction to the works of Charles Dickens, but the study was quickly lured, as it were, into the even broader domain of mystery and mystery fictions. That has remained the focus ever since, but the two most decisive works of detective fiction in the Dickens canon, recurring in the current criticism with some regularity, remain *Bleak House* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood.* This would be invitation enough to frame the study with these two texts, tracing the

development of Dickens's interest in mystery in the texts that intervene between the mystery of *Bleak House* and the early detective fiction of *Edwin Drood*. However, it may be necessary to justify the idea of *Bleak House* as a starting point, given the mysterious, urban or at least crime-related contents of some of the works that precede it — particularly *Oliver Twist, Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Barnaby Rudge* — and the exclusion of *Hard Times* from the later works. *Bleak House* contains the first portrait of a police inspector who acts as a detective in a major novel in English literature, and it follows on from significant other writings, Eugene Sue's *Les Mysteres de Paris* (1842-3) and Reynolds's *The Mysteries of London* (1844-8), and the first of Dickens's journalistic investigations of the London detective force, beginning in July of 1850 with "The Modern Science of Thief-taking" (*Hunted Down* 61-70). Dickens's journalism on the detective police force in particular shows his admiration of their powers of perception and command in the urban setting, renewing our sense of the link between mystery, environment, writer and detective. Where those aspects of mystery in works preceding *Bleak House* are either partial (as the murder plot of *Barnaby Rudge* is[2]) or uninspiring (we can never doubt that Oliver Twist's inherent goodness cannot be erased), *Bleak House* is sustained and co-coordinated in its invocation of mystery, perhaps because it was the first mystery novel Dickens composed since he began making extensive notes on his work during the composition of *Dombey and Son*. Of course, many of the texts that precede *Bleak House* are concerned, as *Bleak House* itself is, with representations of the city and urban mystery, albeit in a fragmentary way, but it is the coherency and dominance of mystery in *Bleak House* that makes it an important starting point. For this reason, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is included in this study, even though in respect of setting it marks a departure from the urban mysteries of the bulk of this study. That is, *Edwin Drood*, more than any other Dickens text, is plotted around the demands of its mystery, so much so that in solving the mystery many readers believe they can complete this unfinished work. Moreover,

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2. See Peterson's comment on *Barnaby Rudge* quoted later in section 1.2.

the discussion of the divided mind of John Jasper in *Edwin Drood*, and Dickens's consistent interest in mysteries of the mind and criminality as well as society, will show that the genre of urban mystery is but one strong influence within a mediating complex of ideas that I have loosely grouped under the heading of Dickensian mystery. Finally, *Bleak House* is generally thought to usher in the new lineage of the "darker Dickens" of the 50's and 60's. This study is not concerned with rehashing this distinction between Dickens's earlier and later work, but the analysis of *Bleak House* and what follows may add some weight to this division. After *Bleak House* only *Hard Times* is excluded. It is not a personal favourite, partly because of those so very un-Dickensian qualities that F. R Leavis praised (187-212), but in its tight and rigorously didactic structure it is also the least mysterious of the later Dickens novels. It has been pointed out that every opportunity for the development of suspense in the plot has been deflected[3]. Thus, *Bleak House* and *Edwin Drood* frame this study, but they are also deployed in a purposefully inverted way.

A mystery is always solved backwards, just as the thread that leads out of a maze is wound up from the inside to the outside. The clues are discovered, assembled and then traced to an primary cause which is then reconstructed and related in its original order. That this process is foregrounded in fictions of mystery and detection makes them distinctive. This study also proceeds backwards, beginning with *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and moving anti-chronologically towards *Bleak House*. Initially, this means that *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, the most overtly mysterious and detection-orientated of Dickens's novels, can be used as a point of entry. However, this is done intentionally not only because of the pleasing symmetry this creates between the subject and the study (and the mysterious text and the reader/critic) but also to expose and explicate this very tempting analogy. All kinds of literary studies, especially those that deal with close readings, purport to tell the true story, or expose the real pattern, by presenting the original text in a new order. This could especially be

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3. See Maglavera's comments on suspense in *Hard Times* in section 5.1.

the case in any study where an analogy between reading and detection is both apt and productive. However, as Martin Kayman warns, this can lead to the proposal of a theory "which situates every event in its appropriate place in an orderly and totalizing narrative" (3). This narrative is then presented as a conclusion rather than a process, as though the marshalling and shaping of evidence was natural and not mobilised to support a thesis already determined upon. There is a teleology, then, in the critic's assembling of material in support of a reading that was already determined to be evident. By consciously adopting a retrospective method I hope to highlight and thereby reduce the dangers of this kind of method. When I reach my conclusion and reproduce these texts in their original order, I am not presenting a reading that was already formed and shaping the argument when I began, but the results of a consistent examination of the scene which is not intended to master these texts but to uncover both continuities and discontinuities, and to admit of profound ambiguities.

In the remainder of this introductory chapter I will outline in general many of the terms (among them substitution, secularisation and urban mystery) and narrative structures (particularly the double narrative) with which I am concerned. Ideas of mystery, detection and narrative will be untangled, and a brief attempt will be made to historicise this study with respect to both Victorian social culture and the study of genres. Thereafter, I will deal sequentially, though in reverse, with Dickens and mystery, from *Edwin Drood* to *Bleak House*. In this, I hope to apply the ideas and terminology already outlined to reading the specific novels. In the concluding chapter some patterns, and some asymmetries, will be noted.

1.2. Dickens and Victorian Mystery: The Clues.

This reading, then, of mystery into Dickens begins — as every mystery must begin — with an enigma. We find our first clues in the unstable relationship between Dickens and the amorphous concepts of Victorian mystery and detection. A survey of work on the development of detective fiction finds that Dickens is always included

among the originators of the genre, yet his status is disputed: he is either a master or a bungler, associated with the development of detection yet dismissed as an inept mystery plotter. The problem lies in the complex juncture at which mystery elides with detection. At the same time, critics not interested in generic studies often refer to Dickens's mysteries in an unspecified sense, and this confusion is also one of definition. To approach mystery is a complex task. My argument is that mystery is grounded in mysterium, in the unknown and the divine (see section 1.3), but through a process of secularisation comes to be enacted in the urban setting (though not exclusively so) and the mind (see section 1.4). Where mystery is located in story, it assumes a characteristic narrative structure: the double narrative (see section 1.5). Yet because mystery can be considered prior to detection, not all mystery narratives are detective narratives. Indeed, though the detective story as we know it today exercises a kind of retrospective colonisation over its own lineage, I would argue for consideration of a particularly Victorian genre, the novel of urban mysteries, that navigates the complex space between the Newgate Novel, the Sensation Novel, the Gothic novel, and detective fiction. In this, I draw heavily on the preliminary work of Anne Humpherys, in "Generic Strands and Urban Twists: The Victorian Mysteries Novel," and Robert Maxwell, primarily in *The Mysteries of London and Paris* (see section 1.4). Thus, beginning with this general discussion of Dickens, detection, mystery, narrative and urban mystery, I hope to track back through all the mysteries of Dickens's later novels. In all of this study, then, I am reading for mystery, but the key concerns of this chapter are with problems of terminology and definition.

A preliminary examination of those historical surveys that deal with mystery and detective fiction from the traditional viewpoint of genre will show that most of these include a section on Dickens as surely as mention the works of Poe or Conan Doyle, yet the relationship between Dickens and detective fiction, and the even more difficult category of mystery, is murky. In the first place, the depth and importance of Dickens's contribution is uncertain. Audrey Peterson includes Dickens in her *Victorian Masters of Mystery*. The title implies that he is one of the masters, yet the weight of his

contribution appears ambiguous. Initially, Peterson writes that although "Dickens was not essentially a writer of mystery or detective fiction, he made some important contributions to the genre" (71). Peterson notes that *Barnaby Rudge* "begins with what appears to be a murder mystery, but it soon becomes apparent that Dickens' heart is not in the development of his plot" (71). This indecision extends to *Bleak House*, the closest Dickens came to a complete detective novel. Peterson argues that Dickens "provides Bucket with a nicely plotted murder case to solve" but adds that "the mystery comprises only a small portion of this great novel of social satire" (89). Haycraft, in his influential early history of the genre, includes *Bleak House* and *Edwin Drood* in his list of detection's precursors, but rejects them as in any way influential: "They will not detain us long. Both [contributions] were even more indirect and casual than those of Gaboriau and Collins" (42). On the other hand, A.E Murch contends that Dickens and Wilkie Collins, "the most widely read fiction writers of their day, both in their different ways exerted a remarkable influence upon the development of the detective novel in English" (91). Perhaps this uncertainty finds a reflection in Panek's reservation that though Dickens progressed in his representation of crime and detection, "we cannot, however, see quite as easily whether, and to what extent, he consciously developed the techniques of telling the detective story" (33). It is, of course, anachronistic to apply the standards of the established and highly codified genre of detective fiction to its precursors, yet to these historians of the genre Dickens occupies an uneasy position as both a master and a bungler. His mysteries are shallow by modern standards (the example of Poe's having solved *Barnaby Rudge* after reading the first instalment is much repeated), and yet important enough to warrant inclusion in any history of the detective genre as a matter of course.

Though Dickens's depiction of Inspector Bucket, the first portrayal of a police detective in English literature, is a sufficient signpost for the inclusion of *Bleak House* in generic studies, this does not account for the importance of his mysteries. What can be made of the parallel assertion of mysteries which interest academic and literary critics who are not concerned with issues of popular genres? Haycraft dismisses the mystery

portion of *Bleak House* as "no more than a sub-plot" (42), but J. Hillis Miller writes of *Bleak House* that, "*Bleak House* as a totality is a 'mystery story'" (*World* 168). More than one sense of mystery is at issue here. The mystery that ~~Edwin~~ Beer refers to in his article "*Edwin Drood* and the Mystery of Apartness" is not that of a simple disappearance. Similarly, Maxwell explores Dickens's urban mysteries just as Showalter draws attention to the mysteries of personality in *Little Dorrit.* Clearly, what appeals to such diverse criticism under the term "mystery" is broadly variable. At the same time, literary criticism has tended to resist plotting and its issues. There is an historical shift in focus at work here. Where the *Athenaeum* reviewer of *Great Expectations* (13 July, 1861: 43-45) saw no contradiction between *Great Expectations* being "a tale of mystery and adventure" and "a novel of the highest order," Hornback expresses the more typical view when he writes:

> if our attention is all on the child Pip's adventures on the marshes, we are misreading, I think: running with the plot, we are missing the meaning. Part of Dickens's brilliance is that while he writes dramatically entertaining adventure stories, his works are *also* serious moral and thoughtful stories. (68, emphasis added)

The strength of that weighted "also" implies that being "serious" is somehow additional to and distinct from being a work of adventure or mystery. That vaguely dismissive sense of "also" similarly, I think, informs a perceptive critic such as Anny Sadrin when she comments: "But, for all its subtlety, *Great Expectations* was *also* meant to be a sensational novel, a novel with a mystery plot, closer in that respect to *Bleak House* than *David Copperfield*" (188, emphasis added). Though there are many exceptions throughout the literature, reading for the plot, and especially the mystery plot, has been traditionally undervalued.

I do not wish to examine the reasons for this change in values, but I do want to argue against its results. Dickens's unstable relationship with Victorian mystery and detection arises out of the imprecision of the chosen terms. Mystery as an intuitive fact draws both the literary critic and the chronicler of genres. Yet the follower of detection finds Dickens's plots unsatisfactory, where the literary critic finds plotting uncomfortable. To clarify this difficulty, the difference between mystery and detection

must be elucidated. One aim of this introduction is to secure the ground for a discussion of Dickensian *mystery narrative*, so that both mystery and narrative can be read coherently. This must begin with the problem of mystery itself.

1.3. The Origins of Mystery: Supernatural and Divine.

To render an explanation or definition of mystery is to become subject to contradictory impulses. Mystery invites our efforts at explanation; we recognise mystery in that which is unknown, and seek a solution. But the desire is ambiguous; the imperative is already confronted by a contradiction, for mystery is by definition inexplicable. To render it known is to strip it of its status as mystery. Furthermore, mystery defined as the unknown can be defined as any unknown. Thus it can be seen how readers and critics may be drawn to many different interpretations of mystery. The inherent broadness of the term enables a variety of critical interpretations but in turn leads to the kind of inconsistency of approach detailed above. What is necessary is to trace mystery through the variety of its incarnations, being aware that no one definition ever entirely closes or subsumes the others — determining, as it were, finally what mystery is — rather that each shift in meaning relocates and yet contains what has gone before. Each meaning is less a displacement than an archaeological overlay.

In the first and earliest sense, mystery is linked to the divine. David Grossvogel, among others, locates mystery within the province of an unknowable God.[4] God is both mysterious, because the deity is beyond comprehension, and a source of mystery. "One of the primary attributes of the deity," asserts Grossvogel, "is mystery" (2). The limitations of human reason ensure that knowledge of God is circumscribed.

> The incompleteness of human understanding makes a god incomplete; even the all-knowing God cannot demonstrate that He exists beyond mystery. Since man's intelligence cannot fathom the mystery that is God's alone to fathom,

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4. See also Spencer for an extended discussion of the relationship between mystery and divinity.

> God becomes a form of the darkness that he was meant to dissipate. God hides; God reveals in order to render manifest that he hides. (Grossvogel 3).

God, says Grossvogel, represents humanity's attempt to overcome mystery, and instead subsumes it. The divinity, by its very nature, exemplifies the unknowable.

God's mystery extends not only to God's creation but also to God's foreknowledge. Providence is mysterious since it expresses both the will and the omniscience of God. God plans, but the nature of God's plans is not apparent to the human observer. Dickens has himself used the commonplace that "Man proposes and God disposes." God also grants humankind free-will, and hence providence is doubly mysterious, since freedom and predetermination are mutually exclusive. God's plan for men, that is, the plot of human history, is among the mysteries that are God's alone to know (Grossvogel 2). Indeed, providence may be said to be the masterplot of human history. Providence and divine mystery will not be incidental to this discussion of Dickensian mystery. As inchoate, though strongly felt, as Dickens's religious beliefs were, his Christian faith in some way informs all of his works[5]. In fact, his Christianity is often strongly bound with his social and ethical concerns. Thus, at some level, the divine meaning of mystery must always be entwined with whatever other meaning we encounter. As later discussion will show, this is especially true of Dickens's attitudes to providence, as is made implicit in his own treatment of plot, which by his own admission was intended to reiterate the patterns of providence (see section 1.6). In novels such as *Edwin Drood* and *Our Mutual Friend*, we see the plot playing out the contest between human will and divine planning, between, as in *Edwin Drood*, the plotting of a murderer and the guidance of a providential power.

Whether apprehended through providence or not, divine mystery taken as the absolute is ineffable — it cannot be expressed. This silence is unendurable. Between the human subject and mystery there must enter an intermediary. The intermediary interprets the divine will and shares in a portion of those secrets, thus becoming an initiate. Grossvogel notes the paradox of the initiate:

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[5]. For a brief outline of Dickens's theologically vague but intensely felt Christianity, see Thacker 103-116. A lengthier exploration of religion in Dickens's works can be found in Walder.

> a human mediator on this side of mystery, positioned between the ambiguous divinity and man. The initiate presumably knows, but he is instantly caught up in the paradox that preserves the indefectibility of a primal mystery: if he reveals what he claims to know, he destroys instantly one of the two terms (mystery/man) on whose coupling his raison d'etre depends. (4)

That is, the initiate becomes an initiate by knowing, yet cannot communicate that knowledge (except as a mystery) because to reveal the secret is to obliterate the very status of possessor of hidden knowledge upon which the identity of the initiate depends. The initiate may be a master "whose power is guaranteed by his secrecy and his status as officiate of the ritual" (Kayman 11). Mastery exercised through exclusive knowledge within a society implies a certain relationship of power. Thus, mystery becomes associated with the knowledge of a craft or an art. The initiate also becomes the master of the guild, or the brotherhood, which implies a power structure, processes of induction, a secret language, symbols, rites and hierarchy. Hence, in the medieval guild, which organises the cycle of the Mystery Plays, the sense of mystery depends both on the divinity and the secret body of skills of those involved.

Through this displacement arises the notion of a certain order of Dickensian characters (a very diverse order) that I term the initiates. At a certain point the privileged position of interpreter of God's will becomes connected with a formal mastery over a body of secrets or enigmas. Thus, the category of initiate ranges from Mrs Clennam — who interprets divine vengeance as her personal right to punishment — to Tulkinghorn — who is a repository of the mysteries of the law and family secrets — to Jaggers — who as a defence lawyer mediates between his clients and the law, and thus carries with him an aura of insight and contamination — to the exemplary police detectives, Mr Bucket and Mr Inspector, who come to assert their mastery over an enigmatic urban scene. I do not propose that these categories are absolute. Indeed, the very instability of the mystery/initiate paradox outlined above leads to tensions and uncertainties about these characters. They exist, rather, on a scale which extends down to another category of character I will call the acolytes, or acolyte detectives, since these characters, like Pip or Arthur Clennam, aspire to the knowledge of the initiates, yet

their defining characteristic is that though they want to know, they do not know, and so they cannot be said to be initiates.

If the acolyte must undergo a learning process to become or confront one of the initiates, this process, as it is for Pip, is often bound to the process of plot and discovery developed through the novel. Thus, the author, or the stance of the narrator, both concealing and revealing, suggesting and delaying, can be seen as analogous to that of the initiate, whereas the reader shares many of the concerns and the narrative trials of the acolyte. The acolyte in the textual world must, like a detective, attend to the clues, close connections, make discoveries. For the reader, the text is itself a system of clues, and our work as readers is collation, the imaginative combination of the clues that makes up the process of interpretation. In this way, then, the acolyte detective models the processes of reading for the reader, subject to the same desires, ambiguities, errors, achievements and limitations that reading itself is prone too. Too specific an identification between these terms can be counter-productive. As much as the reader shares in the anxieties of the main character, we may equally relish the irony of the situation that stems from our greater knowledge. Why else do we guess that John Rokesmith is John Harmon before the character discloses that fact; why else are we more suspicious of Pip's great expectations than he himself; why should we care more about Esther's parentage than she claims to do? This unstable movement beween the reader's status as initiate and acolyte according to the interpretative requirements of a particular moment of the text arises out of the tensions that already exist between the detective acolytes and initiates. The analogy is more productive, then, in terms of models of process rather than in our identification with a particular acolyte figure, a particular character. Nevertheless, the degree to which the process of reading is often echoed in the acolyte's dilemmas, sharing its responsibilities, possibilities and limitations, indicates a sometimes fruitful analogy.

The shift between the priest's centralised power to mediate between mystery and man and the multiple mysteries of a guild will already indicate something of the devolution of the term, further defining a process called secularisation that will be dealt

with more fully in the next section. It is enough to say here that where secular doubt intrudes, it becomes apparent that terms like the divinity or providence may be part of a code which expresses but does not embody mystery. God has formerly been the ultimate term with which to designate mystery, but by stripping away any appeal to the deity, we still find ourselves confronted by mystery. The modern, secular sense of mystery comes to reside in a series of discourses, where in each case the subject is still an enigma. W. David Shaw defines mystery simply as "an ultimate principle that does not have an explanation" (320). Whether God or the postulates of science are the *prima causa* in this case makes no difference. Even the definitions of types of mystery in Shaw's complex taxonomy in the introduction to *Victorians and Mystery* (1-19) are merely a form of substitution for the term "ultimate principle."

The post-modern apprehension of mystery is a transference of language, or the instabilities of language, to that status of ultimate principle. The argument of deconstruction is that some transcendent principle, such as the God of earlier meanings of mystery, does not exist. There is no transcendent signifier that fixes meaning within an immutable code[6]. Instead, there are only infinite chains of inter-referential signifieds. As already intimated, reading itself becomes mysterious, a process in which there is always an irreducible gap between sign and sign — a gap which is invariably filled by the production of new signs. The modern sense of mystery, devoid even of a localising centre, initiates a radical instability:

> the problem now is that in place of one 'master code', we find a range of codes vying for the power of mastery, the ability to hold the various narrative levels in the semblance of unity and truth and thus to determine the meaning of events as self evident. The experience of mystery changes as it comes to inhabit *the gaps between conflicting codes* which a new mastery aims to fill. (Kayman 15-16)

This gap between systems of signification is apparent in Dickens's concern with what Maxwell defines as paperwork (19-20), but extends to all systems that might be said to be semiotic. This includes the abundant writing of *Bleak House* — letters, testimony, wills — and the speculation, the shares, notes and drafts of *Little Dorrit* and *Our*

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6. For an exemplary deconstructive reading of Dickens's *Bleak House* that describes this absence, see Ragussis.

Mutual Friend, and all forms of commercial and legal coding. In *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit* in particular, we see administrative institutions, Chancery and the Circumlocution Office, that through the production of signs, of paperwork, become inherently mysterious, semiotically opaque, unreadable. These institutions struggle to assert some sort of authoritative code but become distressingly inexplicable themselves.

I have argued in my work on *Detective Fiction and the Problem of Knowledge* against a relentlessly deconstructive reading of *Bleak House* (39-46). Though the slippage between codes and the dangers of all linguistic transactions both frightened and fascinated Dickens, I think that his texts can still be read against the notion of an extreme idealism. That is, though signs do indeed refer to other signs, I do not think that a reading of Dickens would affirm that signs refer only and exclusively to other signs. There is always an outside of the text. However mysterious that outside may be, it is not necessarily infinitely remote. The arguments of deconstruction are open to the charges of insupportable relativism and idealism, counter-arguments that are not easily dismissed as merely reactionary. In my readings I subscribe to a kind of philosophical realism, in as much as the universe of things is not constituted by language but is its own object, independent of our perceptions. Nevertheless, we face a powerful mystery, since where a gap inheres between codes and at the juncture of sign and sign, there is also a gap between the sign taken as a whole and the object it signifies[7]. That is, where signals[8] address signifieds that are ideas or concepts resident in language, signs, taken as signal and signified, address real objects, though the steps within these modes of reference are complex and distended. Language, then, becomes mysterious not only in the relationship of signs to signs, but signs to things, or clues to realities. Where we see the detective interpreting marks, objects and traces with reference to unknown events, we are seeing a kind of reading that mediates between the semiotic and the real.

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7. See Shaw 2 *passim*, for a fuller discussion of "mysteries of realism."

8. The signal is another term for what is usually translated as the signifier in the Saussurean semiotic scheme. The term signal, I think, better indicates the purely indicative function of this part of the signal-signifier/signified pairing. I first came across this term in the Roy Harris translation of Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*.

Imagination proposes structure, leaps between the clue and the crime, words and meaning. Mystery lies at the far side of this gulf, inviting reading and speculation, yet resisting final definition. The lure of mystery is its enigmas, its Sphinx riddle, challenge and reward. Efforts to penetrate mystery are only ever partial; the knowable is hemmed in by the unknowable. The aim here has not been so much to explain mystery, a contradictory task, as delineate some of its influences. Where there is always the unknowable God, or the gaps between codes, there is also an act of reading. The struggle of the imagination then, finds its form in narrative, and it is with the structure of mystery narratives and their development that the next section is concerned.

1.4. Mystery: Substitution and Secularisation.

Mystery is inexplicable, un-speakable. Human consciousness cannot endure this silence and obscurity for long. Everywhere, our impulse is to narrate, to find a way of telling by which the unknown can be integrated, invested with structure, attributes, significance. We make an imaginative leap; we imagine relationships, patterns, begin with the question "what if...". Stories multiply from this. Their infinite diversity reflects the diversity of their speculative origins. Only through such an imaginative act can mystery be grasped. It must be drawn within the narrative order so that it may be spoken of, explored through telling.

Within this general process of narrative we can place Grossvogel's positing of a kind of substitution, which draws mystery out of an unendurable and unspeakable silence and into comprehensible art.

> Unable either to grasp or to abandon mystery, [the artist] resorts to a familiar fraud: he attempts to absorb mystery in speculation; he invents incarnations with which he can cope. Literature plays a part in this process, and most mystery is tinctured to some extent with the effects of that concern. (4)

Fiction shares in the function of myth in that it posits orders and relationships, and in so far as all fiction is ritualistic, since it is a process of re-enactment, the reader, like the acolyte at the ritual, undergoes a process of initiation. Our imaginative struggle to

encompass mystery involves a process of substitution which is the process of fiction: we imagine a story, a narratable series of events which expresses or embodies something about mystery in the only way we can, yet is not mystery itself. Where we tell stories about mystery we must create enigmas, disperse clues, formalise the unknowable in knowable, yet immediately puzzling, objects.

> Unable to cross over or dismiss the fateful boundary that hems it in, the frustrated awareness establishes surrogates for the beyond on this side of the divide: a false boundary is posited, but one that is permeable, inviting a mock penetration of the unknown through an active participation (that of the initiate and the initiatory ritual) or a speculative one (through the 'rehearsive' nature of art or myth). (Grossvogel 13-14)

On this side of the unknown, the creative imagination posits incarnations of mystery. The process of substitution imagines some kind of secret or enigma that can be told about, narrated in a way that represents mystery as *a* mystery, and allows us to enact its concerns, complexities and anxieties.

What begins as mythology is transformed into narrative fiction. At the crucial praxis between the older sense of mystery and the modern sense of mystery (which may be defined as a disturbing sense of a loss of centred mystery) already mentioned, the process of substitution which Grossvogel observes also becomes a process of secularisation. The process of substitution allows narrative, gives narrative a kind of puzzle to unravel. The process of secularisation determines the modern object of mystery, the terms with which we make our substitutions. Of course, every age is possessed of its own form of uncertainties, its own doubts, its own paradigm shifts; nevertheless, between the medieval and the modern, and particularly at that juncture known as the industrial revolution, mystery undergoes a shift from an overcode which may be said to be stable and theological to a series of competing sub-codes which may be said to be secular.

Christian allegory is an exemplary form of the older 'ritualistic' sense of mystery. The substitutive corpus is always a theological one. Allegory is meaningless without a definitive and fixed code which links every event to its 'true' allegorical significance. "Allegory as a complete and transparent system is of course restricted to a

particular stage of Christianity, in which the 'code' in question is necessarily communal and sacred — a single unified and exhaustive 'master code'" (Kayman 14). Within the community of reader and writer, allegory is understood because both reader and writer share the one defining religious code. Similarly, within the text the meanings of the allegorical and narrative levels are transparent to each other, shared, since the allegorical code invariably informs the structure of the other. As Todorov observes of the Grail romance, *Quest of the Holy Grail*:

> We are confronted, then, from the outset and in a systematic fashion, with a double narrative, with two types of episodes, of a distinct nature but referring to the same event and alternating regularly. Interpreting earthly events as signs of heavenly purposes was common enough in the literature of the period. But whereas other texts totally separated signifier from signified, omitting the latter because they counted on its notoriety, *The Quest of the Holy Grail* juxtaposes the two types of episodes; the interpretation is included within the texture of the narrative. (123)

In the symbolic universe of allegory the grail represents mystery. "The quest of the Grail is the quest of a code" (Todorov 129), and the Grail is self-sufficient and immutable as code, both the sign and the thing itself, fixed as Christ is the fixed sign of God ("I am that I am"). As Kayman observes, however, this fixed, ritualistic, self totalising narrative begins to fragment into competing codes (18-27). Allegory becomes narrative.

It is not within the scope of this study to explore the reasons for this change. Certainly there is no single cause, but rather a range of reasons historical, sociological and literary: the acceleration of the process of urbanisation, the rise of secular humanism, the development and codification of practices in psychology, medicine, sociology and, especially, the law, and the arrival of commercial and industrial society, with the associated commercialisation of the production of literature for the common reader. Whatever the causes, as Peter Brooks notes:

> The enormous narrative production of the nineteenth century may suggest an anxiety at the loss of providential plots: the plotting of the individual or social or institutional life story takes on new urgency when one can no longer look to a sacred masterplot that organizes and explain the world. The emergence of narrative plot as a dominant mode of ordering and explanation may belong to the large process of secularization dating from the Renaissance and gathering force during the Enlightenment, which marks a falling-away from those revealed plots... that appeared to subsume human time into the timeless. (6)

The nineteenth century is the locus of the rise of industrial society. At this point, mystery becomes secularised, no longer manifested in a single divine code, but divided into a series of secular discourses: social, scientific, legal. Each of these discourses is a kind of substitution; its particular mode of apprehension may be said to replace the unified with the singular, the generalised with the specific.

The reader will anticipate a possible contradiction here, since I have already referred to Dickens's consistent Christian faith and the role of providence in his novels, especially *Our Mutual Friend* and *Edwin Drood*, as representative of a mysterious deity. Right up to virtually the last thing Dickens wrote, the striking passage in which the dawn intrudes into Cloisterham Cathedral (278), there is a providential impulse at work in Dickens. Alongside Peter Brooks's comments above we might consider Thomas Vargish's work on the "providential aesthetic" of Victorian fiction. However, the secularisation I describe is only a process, not an end-point, and its conclusion is outside of the work of this study, if it can ever be said to be complete. The essence of the secularisation I describe is not a total erasure of the divine but a sense of displacement and fragmentation. The mystery of God and its enactment no longer dominates the stage; now divine Law contests the space with secular law, infallible Will with the peculiarities of individual impulses. It is in the interplay, the sense of absence and the engagement between the divine and the secular, that secularisation itself is at work. Thus, there is a confusion in *Bleak House* between the absence of human authority and the absence of a greater ordering principle, between the Chancellor's seal and the Great Seal of the Apocalypse, just as there is a curious dynamic in *Edwin Drood* between the plotting of a murderer and the sanctions of a providential plot. Unlike Vargish, my emphasis must be on the mysteriousness of the providential, and its resulting opacity. However, as Vargish observes:

> From the middle of the nineteenth century on, the providential aesthetic becomes less a representation of order in the natural and social worlds, less a complementary design in the plot, and more an intimation that divine intention can be found only beyond the immediately obscure or preverse [sic] circumstances." (23)

That which is immediately obscure or perverse is doubtlessly the secular, the swarming materiality of Dickens's works, and it is worth treating as mysterious in and of itself. Vargish's identification of a change in the providential aesthetic in the mid-point of the century fits nicely with the texts with which I am concerned. Furthermore, Vargish argues with respect to Dickens's own providential aesthetic

> that in Dickens's fiction a tension develops between the conventions of poetic justice and his representation of the "ways of providence." After *David Copperfield* this tension becomes a conflict or disjunction as the providential intention appears less frequently in generalized social reflections of cosmic order and more heavily on discrete manifestations of divine immanence. (145)

This is, I think, particularly obvious at the end of *Little Dorrit.* Where the novel ends with a glimpse of divine immanence in Little Dorrit's powers of forgiveness and rehabilitation, its central mystery, particularised there in the person of Mrs Clennam, demonstrates a conflict between a divine impulse and a secular commercialism that is characteristic of the fragmentation and displacement engendered by the process of secularisation.

Secularised mystery, then, is fragmented, a multiplicity of narrative. What narratives are to be preferred? What new forms is the discourse of mystery to take, once it is divorced from its divine centre? Mystery, as always, functions on the edge of the unknown, and it expresses, to some degree, our anxiety about the unknown. Wherever that anxiety is located, mystery finds its secularised incarnation. Thus, at the boundaries of the law (which was to absorb the authority of the sovereign) arises the mystery of the deviant and the criminal, the mysteries that Pip must confront, the mystery of the killer in *Edwin Drood.* Within the law reside the mysteries of property, of inheritance, and the mysteries of moral action, the concerns of *Our Mutual Friend, Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit.* For the upwardly mobile individual in the newly constituted bourgeois society, there was a mystery of identity and origins, manifest in the question of parentage for every self-made orphan. These anxieties were apparent in questions of concealed or suppressed wills (inheritance again), burdensome family secrets, hidden causes — anxieties that haunt *Our Mutual Friend* and *Little Dorrit.* The individual struggles with identity and self-consciousness, and tumbles into the

mysteries of psychology, the mysteries of the mind in *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Edwin Drood.* The mysteries of the mind encompass not only the mysteries of criminality, in the divided yet self-aware consciousness of John Jasper, but the sometimes unbridgeable gulf between personalities, the seemingly untouchable mental secrecy of Alexandre Manette or Charles Darnay. With the mystery of identity there also comes the problem of self-knowledge. Some characters must secure their identity through a knowledge of their potentiality, as Eugene Wrayburn must in *Our Mutual Friend.* Others must learn about themselves through the examination of their origins. Thus, we have Esther Summerson's gradual acquisition of insight into her lineage. Finding out about her parentage she comes nearer to understanding her almost primal sense of insecurity and original guilt. Arthur Clennam's assiduous quest to make peace with his personal history arises out of his fear that his parents are guilty of some crime. Even the parentless Pip must, through the mystery text, assemble the clues that point to the hidden order of crime and vengeance that frames his position in society and his understanding of himself. When Pip begins to positively search out the truth behind the rich series of relationships that bind Magwitch, Miss Havisham, Estella and Compeyson, his journey is also one of self realisation, placing himself in true context with those who formed his great expectations. Winning knowledge of others inevitably brings Pip knowledge of himself. For all these characters identity and self-knowledge are linked in the mystery narrative. And within the unprecedented conglomeration of the industrial city there arose the urban mystery, a mystery of the constitution of the city itself: its parts, its function and structures, its margins and centres, its internal relationships, its administration, its dangerous enclosures and, not the least, its surveillance and control. Detective fiction is possible only in the context of detectives, and the rise of the city is parallel to the rise of modern police and detective forces, and their refinement of forensic techniques, as the enforcement arms of the developing legal codes. All these anxieties, then, led to a prodigious explosion of narrative forms that include not only Dickens but the novel of urban mysteries, the Newgate and Gothic traditions, the Sensation novel and, ultimately, the detective novel.

A variety of genres implies a variety of influences and responses[9]. Winifred Hughes, in *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860's*, traces the lineage of Sensation fiction, that genre of domestic suspense that flourished briefly in the 1860's before giving way to the detective novel of the 70's and afterward. Sensation fiction, she argues, grew out of the Newgate novels of the 1830's and 40's (with which Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837) can be connected) in reaction to the ascendancy of realist fiction of the 50's. The Sensation novel also shares an affinity, as Hughes observes, with the Gothic novel of the eighteenth century, though it transfers the Gothic novel's mysteries and terrors to a domestic setting. Furthermore, Hughes writes, "All the commentators on the sensation novel... have seized unerringly on its single definitive feature: its introduction into fiction of 'those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own door'" (6-7). The Sensation novel's concern with mystery enables us to recognise another genre, the novel of urban mysteries. Anne Humpherys, in "Generic Strands and Urban Twists: The Victorian Mysteries Novel," builds on the preliminary work of other scholars, notably Robert Maxwell's work on Sue, Reynolds, Dickens and Hugo, *The Mysteries of London and Paris*. She argues that the novel of urban mysteries is most prominent from the mid-thirties to the mid-fifties, forming "a fictional response to urbanization and its intitutions in the mid-nineteenth century" (455). Humpherys refers to three exemplary texts within this genre: *Bleak House* (1852), Eugene Sue's *Les Mysteres de Paris* (1842-3) and Reynolds's *The Mysteries of London* (1844-8). Humpherys has not coined the term mysteries novel, but she elaborates on the term, writing that, "The plural 'mysteries' distinguishes this novel from the detective or 'mystery' novel [detective fiction] with which it has sometimes been confused. 'Mysteries' refers linguistically to the fragmented and hence incoherent experience of the modern city" (456).

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9. In addition to the work of Hughes, Humpherys and Maxwell, a useful guide to further reading on work on Victorian mystery, detection and Sensation fiction over the last fifteen years is Humpherys' bibliographical article, "Who's Doing It? Fifteen Years of Work on Victorian Detective Fiction." See also Cerrito (ed.) which excerpts most of the major studies on the early history of detective fiction. Another source on early Victorian mystery is Peterson. Altick, Kalikoff and Trodd, *Domestic Crime in Victorian Fiction*, are also of interest, though they concentrate on representations of crime, especially murder, in Victorian culture.

Furthermore, the mysteries novel "negotiates the shift between the two genres [the Newgate novel and Sensation fiction], reflecting an unstable border in the mid-nineteenth century between the public and private spheres" (456). Within the mysteries novel we can locate not only the Sensation novel's domestic Gothic, but a kind of urban Gothic, as exemplified by *Bleak House*, Dickens's first novel of urban mystery. By the 1870's, however, both Sensation fiction and the novel of urban mysteries had given way to detective fiction, and the singularity of its mystery, devolving into the localised, solvable case that was to be the organising principle of detective fiction through to its so-called Golden Age of the next century[10].

The novels with which this study deals range from the height of the novel of urban mysteries to the first novels of detective fiction. *Bleak House* (1852-3) and *Little Dorrit* (1855-7) are Dickens's two most urban mysteries, while *Edwin Drood* (1870), following on from Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), the first major detective novel in English fiction, marks the end of the Sensation genre. Given Humpherys's argument that the mysteries novel negotiates the shift beween the public and private spheres, *Edwin Drood*, in its concentration on a psychological plot and its exchange of the city of London for rural Cloisterham as its principal setting, clearly delineates the extreme boundary of this shift. Thus, the novel might be seen as a point of translation between the old urban mysteries form and the new possibilities of detection, sharing in their potentials and their structures. Clearly, there are other significant examples of generic overlap here, where *Great Expectations* (1860) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5), which in particular resembles Dickens's earlier urban fictions, elide with Sensation fiction and urban mysteries respectively. Thus, though this outlines something of the historical context in which this study of Dickensian mysteries is located, we should be cautious of too narrow a reading of a strictly classical evolutionary model of the development of genres. In particular, one genre does not give rise, in orderly linear progression, to its successor. There are always points of innovation, influence,

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10. The "Golden Age" of detective fiction is usually taken as the period between the two World Wars.

interchange and slippage, so that what occurs is a more complex interaction, like that between non-discrete populations[11]. Thus, the novels of Dickens's maturity, the works of a master populist, carry a variety of influences: the traces of realism, sensationalism, Gothicism and, naturally, of mystery.

Mystery is a complicated and robust concept; enigmatic, yet always finding new means of expression. As a process of substitution constitutes the imaginative act by which we create comprehensible surrogates for an otherwise unspeakable enigma, the process of secularisation renders these surrogates in a multiplicity of forms centred around the themes of secrecy, criminality and identity. Situating mystery on this side of the unknown, we make it amenable to human understanding, even if this is in some way an act of fabrication, a kind of sleight-of-hand, revealing mystery while the depths remain cloaked. In order to shape mystery, we tell stories about it. Mystery secularised becomes narratable. Such story-telling is a powerful stratagem, and it exhibits a structure that, while not unique to mystery narratives, is emphasised by their very subject. It is appropriate, now, to turn to the other unit in the formulation of mystery narrative: that of narrative.

1.5. Narrative: The Structure of Mystery Plots.

The characteristic structure of detective fiction has been well documented[12]. It is possible to find aspects of this structure, as Todorov does, in works which are not detective fiction but mysteries. The essence of detective and mystery narrative is the double-narrative, from here on hyphenated in order to distinguish it from other uses of the phrase. That is, the narrative is constituted by the story of an actual crime, wrong, or secret, and the story of the *discovery* of that crime, wrong, or secret. The two

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11. I am thinking of the contrast between classical Darwinian evolutionary models, in which species evolve incrementally along smooth paths, and the current theory of punctuated evolution, which emphasises the non-linearity of change (the alteration between periods of relative stability and explosive growth) and the richness of exhange between separate genetic populations.

12. See Todorov 42-52 from whom much of the following is derived, and Porter 24-52, for further discussion of the structure of detective fiction.

narratives of the double-narrative are those of the crime/secret and the investigation. The former initiates the latter, as the discovery of the body in modern detective fiction initiates the investigation; however, it is not until the conclusion of the latter, the story of the investigation or the consequences of the crime, that the complete narrative of the former emerges. The mystery narrative is double because the second story, the story of a search, ends in the discovery of the first story, the true story of the mystery or enigma which initiates the quest. "At the base of the whodunit we find a duality, and it is this duality which will guide our description. This novel contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation" (Todorov 44). Todorov elaborates further, using the structuralist's distinction between *fabula* (here fable) and *sjuzet* (here subject): the two narratives "distinguish, in fact, the fable (story) from the subject (plot) of a narrative: the story is what happened in life, the plot is the way the author presents it to us" (45). The second point of view, then, the plot (investigation), is the way we learn about the first. The plot is ~~the~~ what we read in order to learn the facts of the fable. Speaking of detective fiction, Todorov observes that the first story "is in fact the story of an absence: its most accurate characteristic is that it cannot be immediately present in the book," but goes too far in asserting that the second story, the investigation, "is a story of no importance in itself, which serves only as a mediator between the reader and the story of the crime" (46), for it is in this second story that the reader's interest is engaged, even if in the classical detective novel the narration is obliged to be as realistic, objective and factual as possible. In the work of mystery, the effect of the second story, that of the discovery or consequences of the crime, is closer to that which Todorov delineates in what he calls the work of suspense:

> It keeps the mystery of the whodunit and also the two stories, that of the past and that of the present; but it refuses to reduce the second to a simple detection of the truth... there is the curiosity to learn how past events are to be explained; and there is also the suspense: what will happen to the main character? Mystery has a function different from the one it had in the whodunit: it is actually a point of departure, the main interest deriving from the second story, the one taking place in the present. (50-51)

I think the notion of the importance of the story of the present is essential to a reading of Dickensian mystery, and this distinguishes it from the position of relative

unimportance it is relegated to by Todorov's reading of detective fiction. However, I will maintain the term mystery for this kind of narrative rather than suspense, which is discussed in a slightly different context later. Tellingly, the notion of a double-narrative can be carried over from the genre of detective fiction to the question of mystery narrative.

We can use Todorov's discussion of the "secret of Jamesian narrative" to unfold further aspects of the mystery narrative, since Todorov himself adapts the terminology of the double-narrative to this end.

> The Jamesian [mystery] narrative is always based on the *quest for an absolute and absent cause*.... There exists a cause: this word must here be taken in a very broad sense; it is often a character but sometimes, too, an event or an object. The effect of this cause is the narrative, the story we are told. It is absolute; for everything in the narrative ultimately owes its presence to this cause. But the cause is absent and must be sought: it is not only absent but for the most part unknown; what is suspected is its existence, not its nature. The quest proceeds; the tale consists of the search for, the pursuit of, this initial cause, this primal essence. (45)

This absent cause, this unknown agency, is surely mystery. We could have no better formulation than this for the quest for an absent, originating wrong in the suit of Jarndyce and Jarndyce in *Bleak House*. Of the "most elementary case," Todorov observes that it is "formed around a character or phenomenon enveloped in a certain mystery" (45). I would add that this leads not only to elementary cases but complex cases. Furthermore, "intermediary mysteries were further causes where the absence of knowledge provokes the presence of the narrative. The appearance of the cause halts the narrative; once the mystery is disclosed there is no longer anything left to tell" (147). The structural principle here, that of an absent cause (a secret or unknown) which initiates a second narrative, and subsidiary narratives which are all inexplicable, is that of the mystery narrative: a double-narrative. Similarly Macherey, in his description of Gothic mysteries, evokes the same sense of doubleness. "Here is that double movement: the mystery must be concealed before it is revealed. Until that crisis the secret must press upon the mind or the heart of the hero, and the entire elaboration of the narrative consists of the description and the organisation of this delay" (29). The tension inherent in this delay represents "an authentic mystery, which lives entirely in

the trajectory of its resolution" (37). Mystery is structured by a double-narrative, a narrative constituted of a secret, an unknown, an absent cause, and the story of its consequences and discovery. In the presence of this mystery, subsidiary mysteries and confusion flourish. The mystery in Dickens leads to a multiplicity of mysteries dependent on or tangential to the original.

As in the Gothic novel, mystery precedes the narrative (always there is the past wrong, the family secret, the ghost story) and provides its impetus and the phenomena of mystery until the mystery itself is solved or revealed. Before that revelation, the narrative exists in an enigmatic and unsettled state. Nothing can be interpreted with finality since the hidden cause, the reason for events, remains unknown. Thus, within the double-narrative there is a doubling, or multiplication, of possible interpretations. Every event has its true meaning (in the *fabula*) but this meaning is obscured by the confusing events, errors and terrors of the participants in the *sjuzet*. Every sign is therefore doubled, ambiguous. It means two things at once, both interpretable as an overt meaning, the mask, and a covert meaning, the true, individual circumstance which is only covered, and not erased, by the mask. Similarly, every clue bears its outward appearance and its inward significance. Though the mystery initiates this confusion, whatever the true course of events we are always, as readers, orientated by our uncertainty towards the end: the moment of revelation and retrospection.

Drawing on the Gothic tradition allows us to clarify the distinction which is possible between mystery narrative and detective fiction. For as the Gothic precedes detection, so is mystery prior to detection. The detective figure (though not a police-detective by any means) of some sort is a necessary condition for a work of detective fiction but not for a work of mystery. In detective fiction the narrative of the investigation is a narrative of rigorous intellectual clarity, a narrative committed to the logical investigation and solution of a crime, developed through the character of the detective. In the mystery narrative we are more interested in the consequences of the mystery, in confusion, uncertainty and ambiguity, and in the search for the origin of the enigma. There is no requirement for a detective to solve the crime through a process of

rational inference and induction. In the mystery there are often characters who act, in some capacity, in a way that is similar to the detective, but these characters, which I termed acólytes previously, are just as likely to be baffled, confused or misled, or reach only partial or incomplete solutions. Detective fiction has a kind of retrospective analytical force, which is why its historians look back at Dickens and dismiss his detective narratives for their incoherency and lack of exactitude, but it is this very incoherency, the multiplicity of mysteries, that characterises Dickensian mystery. The solution to a mystery narrative, as in the Gothic narrative, is not necessarily arrived at through the rigid formal process of detection. A mystery narrative may share the same structure as a detective story, but mystery is not detection, a term that applies in classical detective fiction a highly codified set of rules and procedures that are not present, necessarily, in the mystery narrative. Nevertheless, both mystery and detection are works in which the reader begins in a state of ignorance and reads on towards a final revelation.

1.6. In Narrative: The Role of the Reader.

The solution is always reserved for the end. It must be absent from the beginning; yet in another way it is also a defining presence. Only the true explanation determines the course of apparent events. Thus, the ending is inherent in the beginning, yet necessarily delayed. It is this tension between beginning and end which supplies the impetus of reading. At the micro-level of the text our engagement is enhanced by mystery. Our continuous state of perplexity draws us closer to the text, and heightens apprehension, since every sign in some way reiterates the overall mystery, and every trivial event could turn out to be a vital clue. At the level of the macro-text — in the patterns, themes, the fate of characters, the development of plot — we are also drawn towards revelation. Mystery is an essential axis in our orientation

towards the end[13]. To borrow a phrase from Henry James's preface to *The Princess Cassamassima*, it is a vital unit in the "economy of interest" (37) of the text, and this economy can be thought of as a system of exchanges between reader and text, an intersecting point of interpretative energies. Such an economy exists because of the tension between beginning and end.

In the plane between the poles of beginning and end exists the territory of the plot. Here, the reader is prey to the dynamics of interpretation. Peter Brook, drawing on the terminology of Roland Barthes, speaks of the "'dilatory space' — the space of suspense" (18). We might say dilatory because it both dilates, opens up, enlarges possibility and creates uncertainty about the future (suspense) and because it deviates, wanders, creates the space within which imagination traces complex paths. Space is perhaps an inapt choice of words; territory is preferable, and will be used henceforth, since the arena of the text is clearly neither a neutral nor an uninflected void. It is marked by desires, expectations and knowledge, by points of blockage and advance, and by points of misunderstanding and realisation — all that forms the entire possible world of the fiction and its conceptual furnishings. Nevertheless, true to Brooks's account, this territory is the scene of deviance and exploration: "the questions and answers that structure a story, their suspense, partial unveiling, temporary blockage, eventual resolution" (18). This type of narrative exemplifies Barthes' *hermeneutic*: "the code of enigmas and answers" (qtd. in Brooks 18). That is, a kind of narrative primarily concerned with the truth of thing. In order to integrate a mystery, to understand it, the reader must be drawn into the dilatory territory of the text. Within this territory, however, we cannot discover an immediate and totalising solution. Rather, we endure uncertainty, deception, ambiguity, since the conclusion is delayed, held from us until it can reach its satisfying and necessary end. Using the figure of the

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13. Coolidge emphasises the role of mystery, and its power to orientate and create suspense, in Dickens's serialised mode of publication. Dickens's serial technique is not a central concern of this study, and is touched upon only lightly, but it should be apparent that both micro- and macro- levels are at play in serialisation. That is, the overall work presents a mystery, but each number must also advance the mystery (or there would be no point in reading it) and maintain the mystery in suspension (or there would be no point in buying the next number).

arabesque, Brooks speaks of the energies of plot aroused from quiescence, and pleasures intensified by detour and deviation, until the plot can reach its "right" end, a new equilibrium (104). Following Todorov — "The minimal complete plot consists in the passage from one equilibrium to another" (111) — Brooks sees that at the end of the process of variance and transformation "start and finish stand in the relation — itself metaphorical — of 'the same but different'" (27). This is true of the energy and fascination of plot and suspense, but we should be cautious of too reductive and teleological a reading of the function of plot. Plot is more than simply a process of delay initiated in order to intensify the pleasure of conclusion. It must be considered in and of itself, not merely as a corollary to the pleasures and satisfaction of reading.

The function of the reader in this process is to guess, to speculate, to engage, to imagine a series of possible outcomes. Umberto Eco delineates these and other functions of the reader in the introduction to *The Role of the Reader*. It is not necessary here to outline all of the mechanisms (world structures, codes and sub-codes, narrative and discursive structures et al) that Eco discusses. However, it is worthwhile noting that the reader undertakes certain extensional operations, forming various micro- (at the discursive or sentence-to-sentence level) and macro- propositions about events within the textual possible world. These propositions include forecasts and inferential walks. The reader is induced to wonder about the next step in the story and to make guesses. We play and meander within the territory of mystery, forming supposition, looking forward to possible events.

These functions could be said to engage not only our interest and involvement but suspense. However, at this point it is necessary to explain some of Dickens's complex and sometimes contradictory attitudes towards issues of suspense, interest, surprise and suggestion. For my purposes here, suspense comes from the uncertainty and tension about future events generated by prolepsis: any narrative manoeuvre that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later (Maglavera 13-14). Dickens, it may be said, preferred plots of suggestion to plots of suspense. Certainly, he valued an open relationship with his readers too much to indulge in the

obsessive patterns of concealment and misdirection that characterise the modern mystery plot — that is, the mystery as it is handled in detective fiction, or by Wilkie Collins. Dickens appeared to prefer suggestion to concealment, and would have objected to any technique which called for overt sleight-of-hand in order to delay discovery. Dickens's resistance here can be connected to his opposition to what he referred to as the mechanical, the over-elaboration of plot. When he advised Bulwer Lytton, in a letter of 20 May, 1861, to alter the title of the story "Margave, A Tale of Mystery" to "A Tale of Wonder" (qtd. in Beer 182), his objection rose out of a fear that mystery would rouse associations with the mere mechanical manipulation of plot, whereas "wonder" aimed at a higher emotion. Indeed, Dickens can usually be condemned for letting his secrets go too easily. Few readers, for instance, will expend too much mental effort in concluding that M. Obenreizer is the counterfeiter and confidence trickster of "No Thoroughfare." This is probably the point raised in a letter of Wilkie Collins's to Dickens, though all of Collins's letters to Dickens were destroyed by Dickens. Collins, the first great master of that mode of fiction which holds the reader in a state of complete uncertainty, may well have suggested that Dickens conceal the identity of his villain with more vigour. Dickens (letter, 6 October, 1859) replied to the contrary: "I do not say that the point might not have been done in your manner; but I have a very strong conviction that it would have been overdone in that manner — too elaborately trapped, baited, and prepared — in the main anticipated, and its interest wasted" (*Letters to Wilkie Collins* 95). Dickens implies that the energies of reading could be exhausted by excessive contemplation and speculation, interest wasted rather than held over to the right moment.

The relevance of this distinction has some bearing on the old argument over the plot of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood.* Gerhard Joseph characterises this as the conflict between the *Agathists* (from the detective fiction school of Agatha Christie), who believe that the plot counts and that it is undoubtedly more complex than it appears, and the *Porfirians*, who argue that the value of the novel is in its psychological depth. My position is that while the plot is important, to assume that for *Edwin Drood* it is as

complex and tricky as the plot of an Agatha Christie story, and that unravelling this (assumed) complexity is a necessary reading strategy, is to waste the interest of reading, to engage in pointless and irresolvable speculation that Dickens would have found over-elaborate and exhausting[14]. However, this notion of interest, which is prominent in Dickens's writing about his art, does imply something like suspense: a strong emotional engagement in the future on the part of the reader, but an engagement that was not to be displaced or overly manipulated.

As the continuation of his reply to Collins shows, Dickens was well aware of the ramifications of the double-narrative, of suggestive plotting and the value of the retrospective knowledge that a surprising or revealing conclusion could bring about. Of his handling of the character of Dr. Manette in *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens wrote:

> I think the business of art is to lay all that ground carefully, not with the care that conceals itself — to shew, by a backward light, what everything has been working to — but only to *suggest* until the fulfilment comes. These are the ways of Providence, of which all art is but a little imitation. (*Letters to Wilkie Collins* 95)

The syntax of this quote is temptingly ambiguous, and John Thacker consciously or inadvertently changes the first "not" to "but" to make a certain sense more obvious (17). Like Thacker, I think that the clause "to shew, by a backward light, what everything has been working to" is not attached to the phrase preceding it, but to the sense of the whole sentence: "the business of art is...". Dickens is simply freer with the comma and the dash than modern stylists. Thus, against concealment, which would defeat the reader, Dickens preferred suggestion, which would invite a variety of interpretation, even the correct one. Rather than defeat speculation, the Dickensian mystery would invite it, always reserving the power of the "backward light" which would show "what everything has been working to —," the plan which underlies the mysterious structure of the narrative. It may be that part of Dickens's immense popularity derived from his ability to elicit interest in the reader rather than baffle interpretation.

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[14]. This is argued more closely in section 2.3.

1.7. Mechanics and Metaphysics.

If Dickens's mysteries are mysteries of suggestion, this implies a new focus in our interpretations. Dickensian mystery cannot be studied solely from the point of view of the construction of problems of detection, in that sense of plot held by the critics of classical detective fiction as a closely designed problem in ratiocination. It is often remarked that Dickens's mysteries imply "deeper" mysteries, more pressing and serious symbolic or thematic concerns. Agatha Christie once noted that all Dickens's work contained some element of the thriller or the mystery novel (Morgan 331); there is usually an overt mystery which grabs our attention, a mystery that exists largely on the level of plotting, and which is therefore an entirely mechanical problem. Such mysteries — the location of hidden papers, the identity of an individual's parents — are entirely empirical mysteries, and their solution lies within the realm of physical data. We might terms these mechanical or empirical mysteries, and note Dickens's disdain for the merely mechanical. However, such mysteries tend to conceal a hidden or covert meaning, a deep significance which is not reducible to simple, solvable formulae. We may term these metaphysical mysteries[15]. In the case of Pip, or in the case of Esther Summerson, the identity of the benefactor or parent is a purely factual, empirical question. Though in one sense matters of purely mechanical interest, they are in fact profoundly related to each character's self-concept. The mechanical mystery contains its fundamental metaphysical concern. As remarked earlier, the mystery of the plot is a kind of sign, standing, through a process of substitution, for a mystery that cannot be openly spoken of but which nevertheless can be seen to be operant within the overt structures of plot. It is these deep metaphysical mysteries that will be the main focus of this study, but we must remember at all times that they are impossible to enact without the organising presence of empirical concerns.

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15. This term metaphysical mysteries is my own usage. It must be distinguished from the term *metaphysical detective fiction* that is sometimes used to descibe metatextual, post-modern detective fictions that consciously subvert their own generic rules (probably originated by Jorge Luis Borges). See Pyrhönen 41-48, for an outline of this sub-genre.

In classical detective fiction it is the solution of the empirical mystery which cancels all other concerns, leading the world back to a secure state in which evil is invariably discovered and punished, and in which moral action effortlessly conforms with the processes of the law. Such closure, in which the reader is left neither with doubts nor significant questions, has led to Grossvogel's position that modern detection and its creations are merely facades designed for the "effortless dissipation" of mystery (15). This is not necessarily the case in modern works of detection, such as those of Umberto Eco and P.D James[16]. Even in Dickens, empirical mysteries can be solved, but the metaphysical mysteries cannot. It is still possible to solve the overt problem, discover the will, the family secret, and yet allow the covert mystery to remain open, perplexing, or even insoluble. This approaches what Shaw refers to as crises of representation "that occur whenever a poet, novelist, or essayist, in boldly confronting mysteries within a subject, refuses to deny bewilderment or pretend than matters are less puzzling or unsettling that they really are" (1). Such crises are relevant to issues of openness and closure, the degree to which a text, at its ending, remains perplexing, ambiguous, or open to interpretation, or reaches some sort of symmetrical resolution or fixity of meaning. Though I will touch on the issue of openness and closure, my interest here is not primarily in these possibilities in themselves. Instead, my filter is, as always, mystery, and in many of Dickens's endings I deal with what might be called the resistance of mystery, the degree to which Dickensian mysteries remain perplexing or even insoluble, or the way in which mysteries are only partly solved, while some characters persist in ignorance. Naturally these unresolved impasses would strengthen the case for an appeal to a degree of openness even in Dickens's most otherwise closed endings.

Like Patrick Joseph Kelly, I want to represent something of this complexity and insolubility through the figure of the labyrinth. Kelly uses the figure of the labyrinth to describe a kind of mystery we can be guided through and explore, but which we

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[16]. See Baltakmens 78-150, for my work on these authors and their reversal of traditional resolutions in detective fiction.

ultimately cannot understand or fully penetrate, since the labyrinth remains contorted and confusing even once we have passed through a part of its coils (81-3). This metaphor of the labyrinth (which is about to become a labyrinth of metaphors) has further resonances for this study. Dickens's texts often come to resemble labyrinths in the density and interconnectedness of their various structures, while they use the image of the labyrinth to indicate both the complexity of the mind and the complexity of the urban-societal maze[17]. Thus, mysterious texts that resemble labyrinths, in that they present no definitive conclusions, are also shaped by notions of the labyrinth and describe the labyrinth. For the reader within the labyrinth, the thread is another formative metaphor. Since one etymology of the word clue connects it to the clew, the thread by which Theseus was led out of the Cretan Maze, the thread can be connected to the mystery-labyrinth complex. The thread can also apply to the line of plot, and the strands of the multiple-plot novel. In its journeys and arabesques, guiding us through the maze and yet subject to the maze, the thread can represent some of the linear process of reading for the plot.

1.8. Conclusions: The Ground of Dickensian Mystery.

In traditional critical discourses, Dickens occupies an indefinite space as a writer of mystery. Associated with the rise of detective fiction in generic histories, he is both a Victorian master of mystery and a writer whose mysteries are often trivial or transparent to modern readers. At other times, the sense of mystery that enfolds his works seems to point always to acute truths that concern academic critical inquiry, while simultaneously his mystery plots are dismissed as mere adventures. Part of this difficulty arises out of the ambiguity of the term "mystery." Mystery originates in the divine, as the inexpressible attribute of an unknowable God. Should we avoid any reference to the deity, mystery remains the unknowable, expressible only as that which

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17. Chapter 5 on *Little Dorrit* will also indicate how the idea of a hyper-text can help elucidate these notions of labyrinthine structure.

cannot be comprehended or explained. Nevertheless, consciousness moves towards an apprehension of mystery. Sometimes this is achieved by means of an intermediary, an initiate whose secret knowledge inculcates that individual into a unique order preserved, paradoxically, only by the keeping of the secret which it is his or her role both to reveal and contain. In order to give form to mystery, a process of substitution occurs. Mystery is incarnated in comprehensible terms, inviting a kind of discovery which is part of the rehearsive function of art. If the medieval form of mystery is allegorical, singular and divine, then the modern form of mystery is narrative, multiple and secular. Dickens, situated at the apex of the process of secularisation, occupies shared ground between the secular and the religious. A writer of deep religious convictions, his art in some ways seeks to represent the actions of a mysterious providence. On the other hand, Dickensian mysteries are intensely secular, representing the concerns of a developing industrial society. In particular, he seeks a way to represent an entirely new and mysterious entity: the industrial city. It is no coincidence that the spectacular growth of nineteenth century cities is concomitant with the rise of the modern police force. To formulate mystery as narrative, Dickens employs the techniques of the double-narrative. As in the Gothic romance and the Sensation novel, there is always an absent cause, a hidden wrong, a buried secret, which initiates the events of the plot, but which remains untold until the end, when everything is revealed in their true relationships by the backwards light the revelation affords. Again, Dickens operates in a mediating space between the conventions of the Gothic and the unfolding conventions of detective fiction, a space that includes, among the other prolific inventions of Victorian fiction, the fictions of urban mystery and the Sensation novel. Here then, lies the ground of Dickensian mystery: between deism and secularism, Gothicism and detection, in all of its incarnations; but the absolute territory of mystery is always the narrative, somewhere in the labyrinth that lies and lures us in between beginning and end.

2. The Mysterious Finality of *Edwin Drood*: Narrative, Droodists, Mind and Providence.

"You have only this beginning and would like to find the continuation, is that true? The trouble is that once upon a time they all began like that, all novels. There was somebody who went along a lonely street and saw something that attracted his attention, something that seemed to conceal a mystery, or a premonition; then he asked for explanations and they told him a long story...."

— Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller.*

2.1. Ending *The Mystery of Edwin Drood.*

At the end of his career Dickens begins but is unable to complete *The Mystery of Edwin Drood.* The mystery so contained is unassailable. Mortal fatality intervenes and defeats criticism. It is not my intention to argue, therefore, that *Edwin Drood* is in any artistic sense a culmination of the development of Dickens's art. It was not the point where Dickens's development of mystery techniques was always leading to, rather, simply the place where this development was brought to an arbitrary halt, and merely another point in the continuum of Dickens's writing. Thus, by beginning at the end of Dickens's career, I hope to evade the covert teleology that can come to inform any study of the treatment of an idea in the work of one author. My aim is to attempt to unpick the thread of Dickensian mystery by beginning with the work which is, even to its title, most overtly a *mystery* novel. The singularity of mystery in this case allows us to concentrate initially on issues of narrative, yet at the same time *Edwin Drood* is, as I have already indicated, in one sense a significant departure from Dickens's old urban and institutional concerns. In *Edwin Drood* the psyche of Jasper is at the centre of the mystery, and a reading for mystery in the novel must be a reading of the career of the troubled mind of the murderer. It is in the next chapter on *Our Mutual Friend* that the multiplicity of mysteries in the urban narrative will become apparent. In *Edwin Drood*, we do see the point where the sprawling urban mysteries have given way to the focused mystery of detective fiction.

Edwin Drood was published in 1870, two years after Wilkie Colllins's *The Moonstone,* which is widely considered as perhaps the first work of detective fiction in English, and certainly did much to form the generic conventions of classical detective fiction (Peters 304). Wilkie Collins and Dickens were friends, workmates and collaborators of long standing, and *The Moonstone* appeared in *All the Year Round*, the Dickens-edited periodical. In fact, the success of *The Moonstone* raised the circulation of *All the Year Round* to a level greater than that which it had reached during the serial publication of *Great Expectations* (Peters 310-311). Initially, Dickens was enthusiastic about *The Moonstone*, but later he wrote that "the construction is wearisome beyond endurance, and there is a vein of obstinate conceit in it that makes enemies of readers" (qtd. in Peters 311). What Dickens drew from *The Moonstone* and incorporated in *Edwin Drood* was that prominent singularity of mystery, the case (the Drood disappearance) that is foregrounded early in the text and solved (though not, of course, in *Edwin Drood*) by the end of the text, that is also characteristic of the detective novel. In this, Dickens makes a strong claim on the origins of the genre, but, as his comment on *The Moonstone* (whatever his motives) and my argument will show, what Dickens would have rejected is the elaboration of plot and clues that turns the reading experience into a kind of contest between reader and writer. In *Edwin Drood* it is still the suggestive mystery, and not the process of detection, that is essential. *The Moonstone*, in its subversion of Sensation fiction, also marks the end of that genre, as the logic of detection eroded the impulse of melodrama[18]. Both *Edwin Drood* and *The Moonstone*, though in different ways, exert a formal and formative influence on early detective fiction. Thus *Edwin Drood* is the first obvious point of entry for an excursion into Dickensian mystery.

This retrospective process is, of course, akin to the retrospective processes of detective fiction — we begin at the end in order to uncover the hidden connections linking this effect to an unknown cause. This can lead to the bind of the "double logic"

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[18]. See Peters 304 and Trodd, Introduction to *The Moonstone*.

which Martin Kayman warns against: "the literary scholar may be tempted by an analogy with the detective gathering material evidence and proposing a retrospective theory which situates every event in its appropriate place in an orderly and totalizing narrative" (3). This is not the logic of the double-narrative, but the logic of an assumed analogy between detective and critic, in which the critic undertakes to assemble and present the solution: that is, the critic's version of a pre-existing reading. By pursuing this analogy openly, I hope to avoid any teleology that assumes that *Edwin Drood* is the natural development of *Bleak House*, but instead uncover those links, some buried, some continued and some abruptly cut-off, which connect the one with the other within a complex web of Dickensian texts. Thus, I hope also to avoid the Darwinian evolutionary metaphor already discussed with respect to the development of detective fiction (see section 1.4). Texts do not evolve towards some determined end through a series of discrete, linear embodiments, though this is not to say that they do not sometimes express definite lineages. To resort to the "double logic" outlined above, my project is more akin to that of a Dickensian detective than a modern one, one that avoids a supposed mastering process: closer to Inspector Bucket, who is a guide within the maze, than Sherlock Holmes, who shows only the definitive way through.

To work backwards from effects to causes is an apt project in the context of *Edwin Drood*, since in the absence of an ending we possess only the effects of a projected plot that the author could not complete. Only the mystery, and not its solution, remains before us. However, the particular risk of interpreting *Edwin Drood* is to fall into the trap of detection. That is, the critic becomes a literary detective, sifting through the extant text, the manuscripts, the plans, the testimony of witnesses (those who knew Dickens, or claimed insight into his intentions) and every other chance clue, in order to discover the nature of the unwritten conclusion. To the purely textual critic, this intrusion of the author's intention is highly embarrassing. On the other hand, these efforts are peculiarly warranted by the nature of the narrative, the double-narrative, since as readers of mystery we know that a solution exists, but that its overt expression is absent from the fragment we possess. These attempts at speculative conclusions fall

within a category of writing about *Edwin Drood* that I will call "Droodist." If the Droodists are, in part, exemplary readers — they respond eagerly to every clue and hint— they are also motivated by a tendency to read *Edwin Drood* as more than it is, to seek out a solution more circuitous and cunning than the one Dickens indicated. There is a sense behind their efforts that *Edwin Drood* is insufficiently mysterious: that the part of it we have is too obvious to contain the real answer. They tend to force on the text a retrospective application of the generic rules of detective fiction. Behind the question of the disappearance of Edwin Drood, then, lies the question of what the "real" mystery of *Edwin Drood* is. The reality of this mystery is not in the conventions of detective fiction that the text anticipates, but in Dickens's fascination with criminality and mysteries of the mind which had always been part of his mystery technique. The innovation here is in the intensity of Dickens's conception, his argument that the criminal mind is indeed a "horrible wonder apart" (233), beyond conventional explanation. This chapter will attempt to trace some of these mysteries of apartness. This mystery must surely lie not in the act but the consciousness of the murderer, but there must also be grounds on which the complexities of the mystery plot can be seen to engage with the complexities of the criminal mind. Through Dickens's process of substitution, we can see how the empirical murder gives into metaphysical speculation. However, a lurch towards psychological interest is in danger of further obscuring questions of plotting. For plotting, in the context of the murderous preparations of John Jasper, is surely an issue in *Edwin Drood*, even if it is ultimately defeated by the simple fact of its nature as fragment. John Jasper plots murder, but a greater force, providence, plots against John Jasper. The final mystery of *Edwin Drood* is a mystery of providence, and that providential structure gives *Edwin Drood* a kind of ending that it would not otherwise possess. In this manner, knowing that evil will be defeated, the reader feels a sense, through the double-narrative, that *Edwin Drood* is finished. Though it remains irrevocably incomplete, there is a kind of ending.

2.2. Narrative: Beginning and End in *Edwin Drood.*

Among Dickens's notes and number plans for *Edwin Drood* we find a list of possible titles for the projected work. The list has led to some conjecture about Dickens's intentions for the outcome of the novel. Before settling on "mystery," Dickens also considered "loss," "flight" and "disappearance" as operative terms, as well as "Edwin Drood in hiding" (*Working Notes* 381). Drawn to the suggestiveness of loss and flight, as well as the more neutral disappearance, critics have speculated that Edwin Drood may yet be been alive and is prepared to return to confront his uncle at the conclusion of the novel. The appended question in the notes seems to support this: "Dead? Or alive?" (*Working Notes* 381). Of course, this final question may refer to the other characters' central dilemma, not the resolution of the novel, and murdered persons and their bodies may be said to be lost, too. The innocuous "Edwin Drood in hiding" may conceal a grim pun in the notion of the body being purposefully hidden by another agent. Even so, recent critics Robert Raven and Elsie Karbacz, in 1994, have argued that Edwin Drood survived his uncle's attempt on his life and will return, and there are many precedents for this contention. David Parker, in "Drood Redux: Mystery and the Art of Fiction," is only the latest in the line of critics who argue that the character of Edwin is being groomed by Dickens for a later resurrection. What Dickens's projected titles outline more clearly than exactly what would have happened is that, for the author, some decisive notion of the outcome of his narrative must have been in his mind when he began to write. Whether Drood has merely disappeared, or been murdered, possibilities inherent in his playing with titles, mattered to Dickens when he began.

That the end is in some way inherent in the beginning is a cardinal aspect of the structure of mystery plots: the double-narrative. The crime precedes the investigation but is only explained at the end of the text. Naturally, Dickens did not have the detailed entirety of *Edwin Drood* in mind when he began, and his notes are not exact plans but more often *aides memoires* and records of what he had done and intended to do.

Nevertheless, the "very curious and new idea" (qtd. in Forsyte, *Decoding* 28) that was to motivate *Edwin Drood* was an essential point of departure, and, as the trial titles show, it was also an idea about which there was to be some uncertainty. It was a mystery whose ultimate solution and resolution would have come out only at the end. As Dickens wrote, he developed his initial idea, and subsidiary problems and mysteries arose. In each case, however, the reader must believe that the author has an answer. The text prompts these questions, but the text will also answer these questions at the end of the narrative. The double-narrative would be at play. We would possess an initial story, the story of a "disappearance" in which a young man has gone missing in a way we cannot determine, and we observe the investigation and uncertainty surrounding this. At the end of the text we would gain an insight into the second story, the true story located at that vital point of elision on Christmas Eve when Edwin Drood went missing, whether it were that of a young man who voluntarily went into hiding, or who had been murdered. At all times we assume that Dickens knew both stories but only interpreted to us the one through the other. And yet, six numbers into a series of twelve, Dickens died and left *Edwin Drood* unfinished.

It is the particular force of the double-narrative within the mystery story that brings a strange sense of finality to *Edwin Drood.* Since the narrative is double, we know that the end in some way informs the beginning. The clues are all in place, but the solution that would contextualise the clues is absent. Working merely with the clues, countless readers and critics have presumed to formulate and project endings for *Edwin Drood.* As the title of the completion by Charles Forsyte, *The Decoding of Edwin Drood,* shows, the ending of *Edwin Drood* does not involve an act of complete creation but an act of decoding, of unravelling the covert action which is only hinted at by the extant portion. *Edwin Drood* is unfinished, but it is complete — we need only discern in the shape of the first part the concluding part to know how *Edwin Drood* would have looked in its entirety. Thus, Dyson expresses his sense in *The Inimitable Dickens* that the last few paragraphs are "a not unfitting conclusion to the novel" (272). In those few disquieting actions — Princess Puffer's threatening wave of a fist,

Datchery's confident marking up of the score — we project the entire conclusion of the work.

In this, the writers of conclusions to *Edwin Drood* do no more than any reader does. Umberto Eco observes the extensional operations that the reader undertakes (see section 1.6). We habitually look forward in a text, building personal speculation into expectation. These expectations are not necessarily based on the solution of the murder — we also expect that Rosa will marry Tartar, or that Helena Landless will yet have some significant role to play in the apprehension or uncovering of Jasper — but they are all functional in our orientation towards the ending where we anticipate the discovery of the murder plot. In this manner, Droodist critics who seek to answer the manifold questions raised by *Edwin Drood*, and then dispute among themselves the validity of their solutions, are exemplary readers, all the more so because their projections are merely more sophisticated versions of the extensional operations that any ordinary reader undertakes.

Droodists are different from other critics, however, because in their reading they seek always a definitive solution rather than interpretations, but the work that attaches to *Edwin Drood* under the banner of Droodist is interesting not only in its content but as a phenomenon itself. In the first case, the ingenious variety of solutions, and the sense that *Edwin Drood* can be solved if we were only wise enough and attentive enough to all of the clues, indicates the immanence of the double-narrative, the way such a structure is presumptively complete. It shows up how speculatively we are drawn into the Dickensian mystery text by the very energy and variety of the suggested solutions. But Droodist criticism also contains a trap, since the variety of contentious and unsettled issues involved leads us not only into speculation, but into thickets of speculation from which it is extremely difficult to be extricated.

2.3. Droodist Criticism.

The Droodist is driven to "solve" the mystery of *Edwin Drood* by completing the truncated text. Often, this is averred as an act of literary detection, a seeking out of cunningly concealed clues. Droodists sift through the text, treat those who knew, or claimed to know, of Dickens's intention as witnesses, and undertake forensic examinations of the whole of his canon and cultural milieu. Charles Forsyte, a pseudonym for published writers of detective fiction, is drawn to these problems in the very sense of detection: *The Decoding of Edwin Drood* was published under the Gollancz Detection imprint. The variety of Droodist responses points to the fecundity of readerly imagination but also, as clearly, to how forceful and various Dickensian suggestion can be, for projected solutions range over a great many possibilities.

Droodist speculation generally falls around a few specific problems: Is Edwin Drood dead, or alive and in hiding? Is Jasper, his uncle, guilty of his murder? And if not, who is guilty? And, finally, what is the identity of the mysterious Datchery? The following comments deal only with the most prominent of these questions, and ignore the matter of Datchery.

Conservative critics, such as John Thacker and Richard Baker, tend to agree that Jasper is responsible for the murder of his nephew, and has subsequently concealed the body in the crypt of the cathedral. There are more exotic explanations. Howard Duffield follows the conjecture that Jasper is the murderer, but proposes that Jasper is a member of the Indian sect the *thuggee*, or thugs, who murdered their victims by strangulation. A similarly exotic solution is that of Felix Aylmer, who holds that Jasper is innocent of his nephew's death, and that Edwin has fled England in order to avoid the results of a complex family feud involving an Egyptian sect. Other critics, persuaded that Edwin is alive, have suggested either that Jasper botched his killing of Edwin in a haze of opium or killed some hitherto unknown relative luckless enough to be called in at the critical juncture. Proctor conjectures thus from the common Dickensian motif of an individual who is thought to be dead returning to observe the

living. Robert Raven and Elsie Karbacz have invented an entirely new person for Jasper to kill more than a year before the action of *Edwin Drood*, a lost half-brother who stands between Jasper and a legacy.

More marvellous and absurd conclusions exist within Droodist literature, such as that of Benny R. Reece, who argues from an elaborate (and largely groundless) parallel with Greek mythology that Helena Landless is the true culprit. Unfortunately for Reece, the passage which he advances as key to his interpretation was marked for and then preserved from deletion in Dickens's proofs (Clarendon 160). This is hardly the treatment Dickens would have given an essential clue, though a truly cunning Droodist could argue that this was a sly piece of misdirection.

Clearly, Reece is an extreme example of Droodist excess. He has crossed some limit of interpretation, though, like all Droodists, his evidence rests within the text. Nevertheless, the Reece "solution" comes to impose a spurious transformative logic of its own upon the text — *Minor* Canon Corner must become a representative of Ursa *Major* in order to fit the Reece thesis. Reece has, like his fellow Droodists, except in a more exaggerated fashion, become lost in a labyrinth of his own speculation — a Droodist labyrinth. His labyrinth is not within the text but a kind of redundant elaboration of the text. Yet Pansy Packenham has also observed that *Edwin Drood* was "not a riddle, but a labyrinth" (qtd. in Beer 183)[19]. How then, are we to interpret Drood, without falling into the meanderings of Droodist speculation? Every critical reading in some sense must presume upon a non-existent ending, or rather, the ghost of an ending, a ghost which is at once an absence, because unwritten, and yet felt as a presence because of the force of the double construction of the mystery narrative. From where can we derive a consciousness of an ending which would allow us to deal with the extant fragment without succumbing to the lure of Droodism?

It is tempting to read *Edwin Drood* as complete: to treat the text as if it required no act of extension at all. This is what Gerhard Joseph argues in "Who Cares Who

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19. I cannot find this phrase in the source referenced by Beer.

Killed Edwin Drood?" Drawing attention to the curious formal symmetry achieved at the end of the fragment, which lends it a kind of completeness, he notes that there is no need for the novel to be finished at all. Thus, all its mysteries remain mysteries without any sort of irritable reaching after facts. This is not feasible, since many of the central issues of a reading of *Edwin Drood* go straight to the heart of the solution to the mystery. Even Joseph makes the direct assumption that Jasper is guilty. Our reading of the fragment must engage in some form of supposition, some reading of surface facts as if they contain more than they represent. If we do not in some way assume murderous intent in Jasper, his plotting becomes wholly inexplicable, and his curious psychology becomes uninteresting. We cannot leave the fragment incomplete; we must imagine some kind of solution. The most straightforward supposition is that Jasper did it.

This is, of course, part of the simple answer to the mystery of *Edwin Drood*: that Jasper killed his nephew and subsequently concealed his body within the precincts of Cloisterham Cathedral. But it is this simple answer against which Droodist criticism reacts and operates. That is, it seems too obvious to be satisfactory, too straightforward for the mastery of Dickens to satisfy the demands of a work of mystery which would prove even more elaborate and cunning than Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*. To the Droodist, this solution is not elaborate enough to justify the position of the Dickensian genius in the canon of early detective fiction.

There are many reasons for preferring this obvious explanation: the testimony of Forster, internal evidence and manuscript evidence. Dickens's working notes link "the murder to come out" and "laying the ground" (*Working Notes* 387); Jasper is the only character who is seen laying the ground. If this is truly the solution, however, the Droodist objection must still be addressed: what is the real mystery of *Edwin Drood*, if events seem to be as any reader of average intelligence would foresee? But the answer is not an over-elaboration of the solution, not in the Droodist efforts to find an outcome more cunning and deceptive than before. The mystery is not to be located in the conventions of detection, in the elaborate concealment of the truth and the need for the

guilty party to be the "least likely" suspect. This would be the sort of mechanical exaggeration that Dickens would resist. The real mystery of *Edwin Drood* is not, in fact, the fate of Edwin Drood, but lies, concealed, in the consciousness of his killer.

2.4. Mysteries of the Mind in *Edwin Drood.*

The novel draws on those mysteries of the mind that we can see in Dickens's earlier work, always connected with the constitution of the individual, the enigma of psychology. John Jasper shares in the murderous violence of Bradley Headstone and the doubled, secretive personality of Alexandre Manette. The mysteries of *Edwin Drood* lie not only in action but in consciousness, not in guilt but in motivation. In reading for motivation, the Droodists are seeking a kind of psychological insight, but they tend to divine material motives, which is why they habitually invent unanticipated inheritances and wills that would drive Jasper to murder. The mechanical or empirical mysteries which fascinate Droodist analysis themselves contain a deeper mystery, the metaphysical mystery not of conspiracy but of psychology. Naturally, the two are closely linked. We cannot guess at how John Jasper thinks except by observing how he behaves; thus, the mystery of his actions elicits this double reading — the horrors which operate in the mind of the murderer are shadowy secrets enacted only in the suspicion that Jasper is the murderer. If we accept that Jasper is the killer of his nephew, we must not merely know how he did it but how he *could* do it. How to be kinsman and killer, so solicitous and slaughterous, how loving and murderous.

At the very first, *Edwin Drood* invites this sort of insight, leading us into the text through the drugged and drowsy consciousness of John Jasper. The opening promises us a world of psychological perspectives. Yet thereafter, though the thoughts and motives of Jasper continue to fascinate us, this insight is no longer granted us. The first lines are paradigmatic of mystery and perception: a reiterated question, a mystery both of identity of place (the apparent doubling of here and there) and of the observing consciousness — "An ancient English Cathedral Town? How can the ancient English

Cathedral town be here! The well-known massive grey square tower of its old Cathedral? How can that be here!" (37). As Joseph O'Mealey points out, the opening scene, in its shifts between visions and reality, the fantastic palace and the actual bedstead, defines John Jasper's psychological state, the split between his aspirations and the reality of his situation (131). The fuddled vision alternates between scenes of sensuous abandonment and scenes of violence: "ten thousand dancing-girls strew flowers" while the sultan is "impaling a horde of Turkish robbers, one by one" (37). Desire and violence are both multiplied and drawn together: "Ten thousand scimitars flash in the sunlight, and thrice ten thousand dancing-girls strew flowers" (37). These scenes, in the metaphorical mode of dreams, point to Jasper's submerged violence against his nephew compounded by his possessive love of Rosa. Yet this is the last direct insight we have into Jasper's consciousness. From then on he must be viewed either from the outside, or, if we are given clues to his interiority, it is an insight sanctioned by Jasper himself: his own words, entries from his diary, the ravings of delirium prompted by Princess Puffer. The exterior view which we have of Jasper after this will always be tainted by this opening. We continue to search in his outward behaviour for the traces of his inward visions. Of course, Dickens could not let us look into the consciousness of the man who was to murder his own nephew, but we are offered further insights into the problem of mind and doubled personas.

John Jasper, lay precentor, occupies an overworked and underpaid — and little regarded — post within the hierarchy of the Cathedral[20]. A man of artistic abilities, he presumes, despite his lowly if respectable state, to dream greater dreams than the common mass. "What visions can *she* have... Visions of many butcher's shops and public houses and much credit? What can she rise to, under any quantity of opium, higher than that! — Eh?" (38). John Jasper, we know, has more baroque dreams than this. Yet he is trapped in the stultifying atmosphere of Cloisterham: "no meet dwelling place for any one with hankerings after the noisy world. A monotonous, silent city,

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[20]. See Thacker 47-53, for a detailed description of the post of Lay Precentor in the Victorian Era.

deriving an earthy flavour throughout" (51). Silence and monotony are even more poisonous for the professional maker of music. Why Jasper is trapped, why he does not make something of his ambitions, we do not know. He may be limited by economic circumstances; it is more likely that his inertia is part of his psychic sickness. Certainly he sublimates his desire for change in opium driven fantasies, which may eventually discharge themselves as murderous impulse.

It is clear that under the strictures of Cloisterham life some negative impulses must emerge in new and grotesque forms:

> 'The echoes of my own voice among the arches seem to mock me with my daily drudging round. No wretched monk who droned his life away in that gloomy place, before me, can have been more tired of it than I am. He could take for relief (and did take) to carving demons out of the stalls and seats and desks. What shall I do? Must I take to carving them out of my own heart?' (48)

The imperative "must" has the feel of an appeal against existing circumstances. Jasper carves out a gargoyle-like alter-ego which seeks expiation for his inaction in opium taking. This, the John Jasper who attends the shabby opium den, and shudders in "unclean... imitation" (39) of the others, is an alien to the figure that Edwin sees: "your being so much respected as Lay Precentor, or Lay Clerk, or whatever you call it, of this Cathedral; your enjoying the reputation of having done such wonders with the choir; your choosing your society, and holding such an independent position" (48). It is precisely this image of Edwin's that Jasper reacts against. But his outburst is merely a superficial kind of confession. Edwin sees it as wholly open: "your painfully laying of your inner self bare, as a warning to me" (49), but at this phrase Jasper halts his breathing, fearing absolute discovery, and only breathes again when Edwin moves on. Jasper's transition is extraordinary: "Mr Jasper, becoming a breathing man again without the smallest stage of transition between the two extreme states" (49). Not merely breathing again, but becoming a different man moving swiftly between extreme states. The image of extreme states within persons adheres not only to Jasper, who is the most sinister example of this, but to other characters throughout *Edwin Drood*[21].

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[21]. Forsyte, *Decoding* deals extensively with this theme.

Other characters in *Edwin Drood* seem to express, in different ways, split or alternative personas. More often than not presented lightly, they are a kind of parody of the extremism in the character of John Jasper. At the same time, they often express a kind of insecurity or frustrated aspiration that is in keeping with the stultifying atmosphere of Cloisterham. In Cloisterham identity becomes mysterious, or in the case of Miss Twinkleton, secretive, a doubling through which one side of the personality conceals another: "Miss Twinkleton has two distinct and separate phases of being. Every night, the moment the young ladies have retired to rest, does Miss Twinkleton smarten up her curls a little, brighten up her eyes a little, and become a sprightly Miss Twinkleton, whom none of the young ladies have ever seen" (53). Miss Twinkleton, in her nocturnal social excursions, is a parody of Jasper's more sinister immersion in the London opium houses. Some characters merely aspire to be other than they are, as Mr Sapsea, bore and "Tory Jackass," presumes to a high position in the ecclesiastical ranks: "Mr Sapsea 'dresses at' the Dean; has been bowed to for the Dean, in mistake; has even been spoken to in the street as My Lord, under the impression that he was the Bishop come down unexpectedly" (62).

Other characters living such doubled roles are not presented so humorously. The Landlesses, brother and sister, twins, are similar in appearance, and seem to empathically share their thoughts. There is an unsettling duality in their manner: "something untamed about them both; a certain air upon them of hunter and huntress; yet withal a certain air of the objects of the chase" (85). Alien and unsettled, in a foreign society, they are both intruders and victims, coloniser and colonised, male and female, poised to attack or flee. As both hunter and hunted, it is possible that they will fulfil both roles — Neville hounded to death by Jasper, Helena his avenger. Their duality is a function of their status in society. Only Miss Twinkleton, who holds her identities in strict ignorance of each other — "Every night... does Miss Twinkleton resume the topics of the previous night, comprehending the tenderer scandal of Cloisterham, of which she has no knowledge whatever by day" (53) — enjoys a kind

of stability in her duality. Yet it is John Jasper and his secret life whom these other doublings reflect and parody, and his divided selfhood which is the most extreme.

In Cloisterham, with its continual hints of a subconscious world and doubled character, Dickens was pointing toward "the tragic secrets of the human heart" (qtd. in O'Mealy 129). No heart in *Edwin Drood* is more secretive, or mysterious, than that of Jasper. Similarly, no state of consciousness is more potentially contentious. Adding to a long line of theatrical murderers, from Jonas in *Martin Chuzzlewit* to the more deeply realised Bradley Headstone of *Our Mutual Friend*, in Jasper the figure of the murderer is surely presented in an even more complex fashion than before. And yet the nature of his madness and addiction is unknown. Is he a conscious killer, a knowing hypocrite, or does Jasper suffer from an absolute form of doubling, in which one self does not know of the actions of the other? What are the motivations of his sometimes erratic behaviour? How can his loving aspect to his nephew be reconciled with his murderous actions? Such questions assail the mind of Rosa when she considers the possibility that Jasper is the murderer of her fiancé, yet she can only conclude, "he was so terrible a man" (233). Dickens adds in an aside: "for what could she know of the criminal intellect, which its own professed students perpetually misread, because they persist in trying to reconcile it with the average intellect of average men, instead of identifying it as a horrible wonder apart" (233). The reader, like Rosa, is immersed in these questions. We are, like Dickens, who had a long interest in criminals, their punishment and education, drawn to and repulsed by the possibility of insight into the criminal intellect. Criminality implies the substitution of the problem of evil with the secular fear of a certain pathology. Like Rosa, the reader's anxiety about the constitution of the criminal intellect discloses this inquiry: what are the horrible wonders of such a mind?

Perhaps Jasper's "horrible wonder apart" can be accounted for by a horrible form of apartness, a split self that anticipates not only Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde but multiple personality disorders. So argues Charles Forsyte in *The Decoding of*

Edwin Drood, anticipating also the argument that Jasper is a clinical schizophrenic[22]. Forsyte observes that there are characteristic differences in the nature of the fits endured by the opium takers Princess Puffer and the Lascar and those attacks endured by Jasper. Jasper turns rigid; his fits are intense and of short duration. The others shake, and recover much more slowly. This difference, Forsyte concludes, is covered by a subtle piece of misdirection. Refering to Dickens's skills as a stage-magician, and the importance in stage-magic of misdirection, Forsyte argues that the opening of the novel, which precedes Jasper's first attack, cues us to mistakenly interpret all of Jasper's fits as if they are opium-induced, whereas in reality they have a different function. Jasper's fits, which are symptomatically different from those of other opium users, are in fact a form of transference between two discrete personas, one of which Forsyte calls the "innocent" Jasper and the other the Murderer. No less than three such transformations occur in the first chapter. Like the cabinet in Minor Canon Corner, where sliding panels obscure one half of the closet while the other is open, both sides of Jasper's personality are in complete ignorance of each other, or, at least, Jasper is ignorant of the Murderer (Forsyte, *Decoding* 98). This condition is a similar, if more advanced, form of that ascribed to Jasper by many Droodists who argue that Edwin is still alive. If, under the influence of opium, Jasper has a similarly split personality, then it is possible that the opium-driven side of Jasper botched the murder of his nephew while the other side knows nothing of this. Regardless of this, the split-personality theory has a basis in the description of Miss Twinkleton:

> As, in some cases of drunkenness, and in others of animal magnetism, there are two states of consciousness which never clash, but each of which pursues its separate course as though it were continuous instead of broken (thus, if I hide my watch when I am drunk, I must be drunk again before I can remember where), so Miss Twinkleton has two distinct and separate phases of being. (53)

Thus, whether the split is absolute and psychological, or opium induced, the contention is that Jasper has two separate and discontinuous states of mind which never meet. The

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22. Comyn, using as the title of her essay, "John Jasper, Schizophrenic," would agree with this interpretation, though her reading of Jasper's schizophrenia is literary rather than clinical.

horrible wonder apart of this criminal mind is, in fact, the absolute apartness of the good and loving self from the murderous self.

This solution is attractive, since it is certainly an extreme form of dualism and a direct explanation for the mysteries of the Jasper mind, but, as John Thacker has pointed out, it is morally uncomfortable (58). If one Jasper is truly good and innocent, while the other is a totally corrupted murderer, then the good Jasper will die a wrongful death as an innocent man while being morally exonerated, freed of blame, thanks to the activities of his darker half. In effect, this kind of binarism is a simplification; though complicated in its execution, it is reductive in its ethics, relieving Jasper of his responsibilities as kinsman, host and human being. Furthermore, as Thacker, among others, has pointed out (135), the Twinkleton description is a gentle parody of the central mechanical device of Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, in which the jewel is "stolen" by Franklin Blake while under the influence of opium, after which he forgets his involvement. Dickens approved of *The Moonstone* at first, but later wrote that: "The construction is wearisome beyond endurance, and there is a vein of obstinate conceit in it that makes enemies of readers" (qtd in Peters 311). If, as already discussed, Dickens preferred suggestion and surprise to obstinate misdirection (section 1.6), what was the character of Jasper to suggest, if not absolute binarism? What was the idea — "a very curious and new idea for my new story. Not a communicable idea (or the interest of the book would be gone) but a very strong one, though difficult to work" (qtd in Forsyte, *Decoding* 28) — that seemed to lodge in the personality of John Jasper? If it was not to be like Miss Twinkleton's "two distinct and separate phases of being," (53) what was it?

What we tend to overlook in that phrase, even when reading it as a satirical swipe at *The Moonstone*, is the ironic tone, for Miss Twinkleton is merely likened to the drunkard, and in both her social states she is perfectly well aware of the other. Like other doubled characters in Dickens, such as Wemmick (at Walworth and at Little Britain) or Sairey Gamp (and her projected double, Mrs Harris), the divisions are divisions of habit, not absolute divisions of the psyche. Miss Twinkleton is but one

person, existing in two separate modes, but the barrier between them is an elegant mental fiction. So, the mind of Jasper, though drawn between the two extremes of loving uncle and killer, is yet one entity, continuous and self aware. As A.E Dyson in "*Edwin Drood*: A horrible wonder apart" argues, "The 'split' in [Jasper] is not between two personalities but two deliberate *personae* — the respectable public self of Cloisterham and the exotic private self of the Limehouse den. At all times in his 'normal' life Jasper commands both *personae*" (153). The curiosity and the difficulty of Dickens's idea, then, lay in its very simplicity, for Jasper was not to be a psychotic double person, of whom one half never knew the workings of the other, but instead one person, one personality which would swing, sometimes wildly, between two extremes of mind. The complexity of the presentation of this idea lies beyond simple binarism, since Jasper is at one and the same time killer and conventional man, alternating between the two poles of his being, and yet always with the seed of self-awareness within him. To humanise such a state of mind would be a task worthy of Dickens's art, far more complex and demanding than Forsyte's Jasper and Murderer solution. To present the movements, the tides of Jasper's doubled but undivided mind as they flowed along the complex poles of passion, love, hatred, longing and obsession, would indeed be "very difficult to work." The logic of such a mind, murderous, knowing itself murderous, resisting murder and yet unable or unwilling to change, is not the common logic of the self which could be solved by the simple conceit of psychological or opium-induced split personalities. It is, indeed, "a horrible wonder apart" which Dickens wished to communicate. Without a close reading of this mystery, the most prominent of all the mysteries of the mind in *Edwin Drood*, as an ongoing process, our understanding of the novel is incomplete. In the extant half of *Edwin Drood* we can see the subtle and complex process in motion, not as a simple dualism but a horrible career.

2.5. "A Horrible Wonder Apart": The Career of the Murderer.

Edwin Drood opens within the consciousness of John Jasper, a beginning both illuminating and deceptive. His fantasies of violence and sensuous fulfilment are subtle clues to his inner desires, but, as Charles Forsyte has pointed out in "How Did Drood Die?", these visions are only the conclusion, the last part of a grimmer scenario: the long journey undertaken in the opium trance, which we later learn is nothing less than the rehearsal of murder (268-271). John Jasper's opium dreams, it seems, are not so much cathartic as a means of bolstering his resolve. If, at first, they were a way of harmlessly living out his darkest desires, eventually they become a prefigurement of and goad to action.

Following this opening, and Jasper's return to Cloisterham, is Jasper's first meeting with his nephew, an interview which is both alarming and tender. In this scene we see Jasper's love for his nephew, but we also come closest to a kind of confession or admission of his deepest desires — even a warning. John Jasper's chambers, sombre, shadowed, with the portrait of Rosa Bud in a central position, hold clues to his character, if only Edwin could perceive them. At first, however, Jasper is deeply, perhaps even overly, affectionate: "'My dear Jack, I am as dry as a bone. Don't moddley-coddley, there's a good fellow'" (44). Dickens emphasises twice in the chapter, in two fits, one reported and one actually seen, the effect that Jasper's opium taking has on him. In Jasper's physical reactions to opium we see the close proximity of his dreams of murder. At the same time, the uncle who observes his nephew with such "hungry, exacting, watchful and yet devoted attention" (44) comes close to confessing, or justifying, his murderous fantasies and his opium taking. Edwin Drood is too shallow to recognise any of this, and so the scene proceeds between Jasper's oblique confessions and Edwin's cheerful and superficial misunderstanding of him. When Edwin bursts out that, "*You* can choose for yourself. Life, for *you*, is a plum with the natural bloom on; it hasn't been over-carefully wiped off for *you*," he does, in fact, describe the very sense of constraint that Jasper feels. That his outburst refers in

the main to his planned marriage to Rosa Bud merely adds to the unconscious injury. It is during this speech that Jasper has a fit. Edwin wonders if he has hurt his uncle's feelings. Jasper speaks vaguely of a pain. When the fit has passed, Jasper tells his nephew, "There is said to be a hidden skeleton in every house; but you thought there was none in mine, dear Ned" (47) and goes on to describe his sense of enclosure and frustration at Cloisterham life. Complex impulses are at work here: on the one hand, Jasper is thinking of murder and violence (in the MS a reference to knives was deleted (Clarendon 10-11)), yet the potential murderer also tries to deflect the violence, to make an oblique confession of the very forces which are driving him. The part of Jasper which is tender and loving seeks to confess, yet his murderous intent obscures this desire and holds him back from full disclosure. When Jasper speaks "he lays a tender hand upon his nephew's shoulder, and, in a tone of voice less troubled than the purport of his words — indeed with something of raillery or banter in it — thus addresses him" (47). In the gaps between his tender gesture, the dark import of his words and the disguising tone of his words, lie the complex stresses and conflicts within John Jasper. Edwin misunderstands these signals, or rather, reads only their surface import. Jasper communicates in a profoundly mysterious manner — his every word is a clue to his murderous intent and frustration but also contains a superficial and less ominous truth. Ironically, Edwin thanks him: "I have something impressible within me, which feels — deeply feels — the disinterestedness of your painfully laying your inner self bare, as a warning to me" (49). He misinterprets both the inner self and the warning. John Jasper concludes on an ominous note: "You won't be warned?" (50). Edwin will not be warned — he has not the maturity or the insight to see the deep clash of impulses within his uncle. In another grim foreshadowing, the chapter ends with the two men deciding to walk in the churchyard.

The Cathedral and its environs are the grounds within which Jasper plots his murder. Those Droodists who debar Jasper as the murderer have an intensely difficult task in dismissing his assiduous preparation for the murder: cultivating Sapsea, touring the crypt with Durdles, fomenting the quarrel between Edwin and Neville Landless. In

all of this he exhibits a calculating and malicious command of circumstances. If the John Jasper of the second chapter scruples enough at murder to in some way reveal his inward impulses, then the Jasper of "A Night with Durdles" consciously plots to commit a murder. There is no other explanation for this outing which even Dickens names "the unaccountable expedition" (160). The arrival of Neville Landless in Cloisterham is, to Jasper, fortuitous; it is also unexpected, yet within the space of hours he has begun to prepare Landless for the role of scapegoat for the murder by encouraging a quarrel between the two young men. This side of Jasper plots coldly, swiftly and efficiently.

Landless could not be more apt to Jasper's plans. The very qualities which Landless possesses are those within Jasper which simultaneously he represses and drive him to murder. Landless admits that he is "secret and revengeful. I have always been tyrannically held down by the strong hand. This had driven me, in my weakness, to the resource of being false and mean" (90). Jasper, also secretive and vengeful, has in Landless a perfect surrogate for his darker self. Like Bradley Headstone imitating Rogue Riderhood in dress, but in a more elaborate fashion, Jasper finds a vessel towards which he directs suspicion. The doubled murderer has a physical shadow through which he forces a kind of apartness, the ascription of his own homicidal impulses to another. The very terms of complaint with which the argument between Landless and Drood is encouraged, including sexual jealousy, are those resentments which Jasper bears towards his nephew. Jasper, then, begins to represent his own grudges through Neville.

As Neville Landless is groomed by Jasper to act out the part of murderer, the better part of John Jasper may recoil in fear from the very role that he has created for Neville out of his own desires. John Jasper is repulsed by his substitute self, deepening his mental partition. Of course, these admissions further his plans, building a role for Neville, but as Landless represents the violent part of Jasper's personality even to himself, his confessions of fear are genuine confessions. Where Jasper communicates his fear to Crisparkle he does so, curiously, through his diary. The

diary, which is normally an intimate and personal document, becomes, in a limited way, public because Jasper can express his inner evil only by indicting another:

> After what I have just now seen, I have a morbid dread upon me of some horrible consequences resulting to my dear boy, that I cannot reason with or in any way contend against. All my efforts are vain. The demoniacal passion of this Neville Landless, his strength in his fury, and his savage rage for the destruction of its object, appal me. (132)

Replace 'Neville Landless' with 'John Jasper' in this passage, and we have an account of the state of affairs of the mind of its author. The diary entry is both self-analysis and deception. John Jasper, in his doubled self, creates a surrogate figure, a vessel for his own suppressed resentment. This furthers his plans, but the psychological logic of it — a logic which is both rational and irrational to our ordinary understanding — exacerbates his mental split, though we must remember that this split is never absolute but part of a turbulent polarity. This mental state is both "a horrible wonder apart" from the norms of behaviour and a state of apartness. Though coldly planning a murder, Jasper is also a fearful onlooker to his own plans, as personified by him in Neville Landless. It may be that subject to these divisive pressures he can only seek to close the breach in his psyche by going through with the plan, finally uniting himself with the murderer's role he has projected on to Neville Landless. It is Dickens's darkest insight that the fulfilment of his careful preparations only deepens the confusion within John Jasper. By becoming a murderer he is morally set apart from humanity by the very act that sought to correct his apartness.

In the aftermath of the murder John Jasper immediately pursues Neville Landless in order to confront him with the disappearance of Edwin Drood and tirelessly searches the banks of the river for some sign of his nephew (189). He plays the accuser and the distraught uncle to perfection, and it may be that this is more than simple acting. Like Macbeth, for whom to be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus, everything, Jasper now depends on the guilt of Neville and his own innocence — these things are not merely acted but devoutly believed. And yet within hours he is confronted with a devastating revelation, and suffers his most extreme fit so far. The entire futility of his planning and the murder is thrown in his face by Grewgious, who

reveals that Rosa and Edwin had called off their engagement. Jasper collapses, unconscious; the killing of Edwin Drood has been superfluous, for nothing. Though Jasper has assumed the part of the outraged uncle, he has also been conscious of his own guilt, and this consciousness is brought heavily upon him by the realisation of the futility of his actions. It is Dickens's supreme artistry that Jasper, like Shakespeare's Macbeth, is driven only to greater and greater extremes by the very act he believed would bring him security. A divided character before the murder, though no simple Jekyll and Hyde automaton, after the murder he is driven to even more extraordinary and contradictory behaviour.

Jasper's first impulse is denial. He cannot deny his complicity in murder, since no one has accused him yet; hence, he can only deny the possibility of murder itself. He insists that the devastating news that has come to him gives him hope that Edwin may yet be alive. He admits openly to a prejudice against Neville Landless, since a belief that Neville is his nephew's killer would contradict his new-found hope. Yet suppressed guilt will find a way out, and Jasper's surrogate vessel for his guilt and denial is Neville. Furthermore, he soon learns that Neville is a potential rival for Rosa's affections. This is another motive to persecute the youth (Forsyte, *Decoding* 200). Edwin's personal effects are found at Cloisterham weir. It is generally understood that Crisparkle is led to them by some suggestion planted by Jasper, though the evidence for this is sketchy to non-existent. In one sense, Jasper has planned too well: despite his effort to deny the possibility of murder, the suspicion of guilt fastens on Neville even more powerfully. Once again, Jasper executes an extraordinary reversal of behaviour. He now firmly believes in Edwin's murder. Yet he cannot, now that he knows how futile that murder is, admit his own complicity. His apartness becomes a need to assume a variety of dramatic parts. He is a tortured figure, both knowing and willingly unknowing, desperate to play the role of loving uncle and avenger, yet driven to revealing his own complicity. Once again the public-private diary entry, the lie that contains a strange kind of truth, expresses this:

> My dear boy is murdered.... All the delusive hopes I have founded on his separation from his betrothed wife, I give to the winds. They perish before this fatal discovery. I now swear and record the oath on this page, That I nevermore will discuss this mystery with any human creature, until I hold the clue to it in my hand. That I never relax in my secrecy or in my search. That I will fasten the crime of the murder of my dear dead boy upon the murderer. And That I devote myself to his destruction. (201)

This oath contains a kind of psychological utility. On the one side, the ironic counter-meaning contains the seeds of Jasper's destruction. On the other, to pin the crime ultimately on Neville is, for Jasper, to rid himself of guilt and, indirectly, to lead to his ultimate aim. But it entails even more bizarre contortions of his character.

In the garden of Miss Twinkleton's ("Shadow on the Sundial"), Jasper plays the lover and villain to exaggerated lengths. His words are wild and over-dramatic, his actions constrained. Jasper is acting out two parts for separate yet simultaneous audiences. In its juxtaposition of the melodramatic actions of the villain and domestic setting, the interval has a Sensation fiction flourish. The entire scene is extreme, but this is because Jasper now operates in an extreme state where his wild fantasies intrude on his daylight behaviour. In his protestations of love to Rosa, Jasper veers perilously close to an outright confession of guilt: "I have made my confession that my love is mad. It is so mad that, had the ties between me and my dear lost boy been one silken thread less strong, I might have swept even him from your side when you favoured him" (229). This is not the confession of a cold and calculating killer, this near admission of guilt. It rises out of the massive fractures in John Jasper's mind: his knowledge of his own guilt and his desperate desire not to be guilty. The same need is evident in his determination to pin the crime on Neville, along with the ironic coda that it is Jasper who, in fact, pursues himself:

> 'I have devoted myself to the murderer's discovery and destruction, be he who he might, and that I determined to discuss the mystery with no one until I should hold the clue in which to entangle the murderer as in a net. I have since worked patiently to wind and wind it about him; and it is slowly winding as we speak.' (229)

His apartness is manifest again, as Jasper must be both suspect and accuser. There is another reason why Jasper must make Neville guilty. Only if this is so can he perhaps find the emotional leverage with which to force Rosa to accept him, and only in

winning her can he justify the otherwise futile murder of his nephew. His complicated and excessive threats against Neville, meant to influence Rosa, are the only means by which he can win. Of course, Jasper is once again in the grip of fantasy, the same place he entered and re-entered under the influence of opium, but, as he lived out his fantasies in the murder of his nephew, now he must try to live out his fantasies of revenge and expiation in order to win through to an ecstatic triumph.

Naturally, the terrified Rosa can understand none of this. If there is any index to the complexity of the mysteries in the mind of John Jasper, it is the list of desperate questions inspired by his actions in the thoughts of Rosa Bud:

> If he were afraid of the crime being traced out, would he not rather encourage the idea of a voluntary disappearance? He had even declared that if the ties between him and his nephew had been less strong, he might have swept 'even him' away from her side. Was that like his having really done so? He had spoken of laying his six months' labours in just vengeance at her feet. Would he have done that, with the violence of passion, if they were a pretence? Would he have ranged them with his desolate heart and soul, his wasted life, his peace, and his despair? (233)

Only by ranging backwards over these questions can the reader gain insight to these mysteries, which show the complex and dynamic patterns in the divided mind of John Jasper. Dickens carefully reminds the reader in this very passage that the criminal intellect is "a horrible wonder apart" which cannot, as Rosa tries to, be reconciled with the "average intellect of average men" (233). In the terrifying excesses and reversals of Jasper's behaviour, we see this affirmed. Jasper is not comprehensible as a simple stock villain or as a static split persona. Neither of these explanations answers to the complexity of the questions his behaviour elicits. Perhaps in the ending that we do not possess, yet which everything hints at, only a further kind of doubling and wonder apart can enable John Jasper to see himself as he is, and close the fatal breach in his personality. Forster wrote that *Edwin Drood* would end with "the review of the murderer's career by himself at the close, when its temptations were to be dwelt upon as if, not he the culprit, but some other man, were the tempted" (qtd. in Thacker 60). Such a resolution is compatible with the psychological conditions so far outlined in

John Jasper's murderous career, but it depends not merely on the disposition of character but the resolution of a complex plot.

2.6. The Murderer's Plotting and the Providential Plot.

O'Mealy expresses the more common attitude to Dickens's plotting when he writes that, "Dickens's plots rarely represent more than a minor facet of the genius we call Dickensian" (129). While character is a powerful consideration in reading *Edwin Drood*, we are not reading coherently without reading for the plot. For our understanding of Jasper's motives derives from the clues of his actions, and his actions are clearly directed towards one end. John Jasper is, fundamentally, a creature of plot: he is a character who plots (in the murderous and planning sense) and it is his plotting, and the consequences of his plotting, which command much of the fascination of the novel. But there is, nonetheless, an agency that works against John Jasper, a counterplot that operates against the grain of his plotting. There are points of resistance, of course, in all the characters who work against John Jasper, from the detective figure Datchery to Rosa Bud (who evades Jasper by running away from him). These form the moral core of good characters who eventually come to suspect and then oppose him. In the novel's last, ominous gestures, we can but assume that Jasper will ultimately be captured and defeated. Some greater force than these characters also operates in *Edwin Drood.* This is the force of providence. As Sapsea observes, "'Man proposes, Heaven disposes'" (66). The sentiment may seem pompous in the mouth of this comic figure, but the phrase is formulaic, vitually a truism to the Victorian frame of mind, and this indicates the prevalence of what Vargish called the "providential aesthetic" in Victorian fiction. Jasper rebels against the moral order and assiduously plans his murder, but a greater power than he plans against him, and so creates the circumstance of his destruction. Providence, plotting and psychological necessity are closely aligned here.

John Jasper, pre-eminently, plots. Seeking the transformation of fantasy into reality, first through opium visions and then through action, he plans and arranges matters towards this end. No Droodist "solution" which seeks to exonerate Jasper can convincingly deal with the range of his efforts: he foments a quarrel between Neville and Edwin, cultivates the aid and influence of Sapsea, and carefully reconnoitres the scene of the murder-to-be, Cloisterham Cathedral, from its crypt to its tower. Such gestures are enigmatic. For the reader at first reading, they are both ominous and strangely inexplicable — it is only the completion of the double-narrative which will place the fullness of their meaning in our hands. As Dickens wrote in his notes for the chapter "A Night with Durdles," the aim was to "Lay the ground for the manner of the Murder, to come out at last" (*Working Notes* 387). In the first place, it is Jasper who carefully prepares for murder, securing his access to the tower and a hiding place for the body, and going so far as to partly enact the murder itself by half throttling the street-imp, Deputy. The preceding chapter is "Smoothing the Way," that is, as Dickens writes in his notes, "for Jasper's plan" (*Working Notes* 387). But the phrase "Lay the ground" is now familiar: Dickens used the same words when speaking of the plotting for *A Tale of Two Cities*, in a rather different context. "The business of art is to lay all that ground carefully, not with the care that conceals itself... but only to *suggest* until the fulfilment comes. These are the ways of Providence, of which all art is but a little imitation" (*Letters to Wilkie Collins* 95). Yet where Alexandre Manette's secrets are prepared for and revealed, so too was the purpose and meaning of Jasper's plotting to be eventually uncovered. In a novel in which the character plots, the author creates a narrative plot, and this plotting is conceived of in conscious imitation of providence. Informing the narrative is providence, God's plotting. The novel of mystery and detection is commonly thought of as being pre-eminently concerned with plot, but the plot that Dickens plays with here is not merely the enclosed plot of John Jasper, but the greater divine plot that encompasses him, and this is a providential plot.

The mysterious relationship between human choice and divine ordering is a complex one. Sapsea may fear having advanced his wife's demise through over-

stimulating her, but Jasper replies that "he 'supposes it was to be'" (66). In some cases, chance seems to advance the murderer's course. Jasper has no way of anticipating the Landless's arrival, or that Neville will be a perfect scapegoat. The storm which provides cover for his murder is purely fortuitous (for him). On the other hand, human intention is profoundly circumscribed by circumstances. Jasper, for all of his abilities, has an inadequate career. The family histories of the Buds and Droods are marred by tragedies, drowning, accidental deaths. Their intentions, in terms of the proposed engagement between Edwin and Rosa, are not fulfilled. Human beings enjoy freedom of choice, even the freedom to murder, but the outcome is not determinable. The victim is given an opportunity to save himself, in the form of a warning (179), yet he chooses to ignore or misinterpret this, and so goes to his death. To this complex mesh of choice, chance and providence, there are no apparent answers. Like Grewgious observing the stars, we cannot interpret that future that is designed by God's providence:

> his gaze wandered from the windows to the stars, as if he would have read in them something that was hidden from him. Many of us would, if we could; but none of us so much as know our letters in the stars yet — or seem likely to, in this state of existence — and few languages can be mastered until the alphabets are mastered. (216)

The fixed pattern of the stars is the fixed pattern of providence, but that pattern is not legible to the human observer in this stage of existence. Thus, both chance and choice can seem to be part of a wider design. Though it is possible neither to predict nor enforce the future, it is possible to discern within the novel the working of a divine providence.

Out of the tragic circumstances of the older generation comes the planned engagement between Edwin and Rosa, and the ring which is a token of that pact. Though the intention of the engagement is, perhaps, a futile attempt to control the future, it is conceived of not punitively (as the Harmon Will is) but as a hopeful project, with no absolute binding power. Nevertheless, the ring represents the characters' faith in providence. It is a symbol of the trust that Grewgious repeatedly emphasises, and a symbol of fidelity between the living and the dead. "'Your placing it on her finger,'

said Mr Grewgious, 'will be the solemn seal upon your strict fidelity to the living and the dead'" (145). By putting their faith in the past and the possibility of the future, the characters put their faith in a beneficial design. It is the trust implicit in the giving and holding of this ring which brings out the best in both Rosa and Edwin. Otherwise immature characters, who tend in their relationship to childish arguments, the decision engendered by the ring, the serious choice not to marry, brings out the better, more mature aspects of their characters: "The relations between them did not look wilful, or capricious, or a failure, in such a light; they became elevated into something more self-denying, honourable, affectionate, and true" (165). So Edwin, retaining the ring to return to Grewgious, paradoxically holds to the trust between past and future, and shows his fidelity to providence.

The ring is among his personal effects when he is murdered, but it is not one of those items so exactly catalogued by Jasper. Nor is it found by Crisparkle at the weir. It still accompanies the body and thus, as a unique object, it will identify the corpse. Having already emerged unscathed from the death by drowning of one owner, it will similarly emerge, uncorrupted, from the quicklime which now conceals Edwin Drood's remains[23]. Edwin's keeping of the ring is a providential choice and the culmination of a complex chain of circumstances. Its power, in this case, is absolutely decisive. Edwin's decision is the choice of a moment, but also laden with the entirety of his responsibility to the past:

> Let them be. Among the mighty store of wonderful chains that are forever forging, day and night, in the vast ironworks of time and circumstance, there was one chain forged in the moment of that small conclusion, riveted to the foundations of heaven and earth, and gifted with invincible force to hold and drag. (169)

Dickens's view of providence is profound and universal. This "small conclusion" is set among a "mighty store of wonderful chains." Trivial of itself, it is a vital point in the plot, a chance decision which is not merely chance but driven by a mysterious providence. Minor, yet of monumental importance, it expresses the paradox of God's

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[23]. Though Dickens's belief that quicklime will destroy a human corpse is, in fact, erroneous.

mystery, His infinite care for the slightest detail. Its potential force is a gift which, like grace, cannot be earned but is divinely given. Its power to "hold and drag" is equal to the strength of divine justice, and its object will be John Jasper.

Already we have seen Jasper's repeated assertions of his determination to track down the killer, as in the oath he shows to Grewgious. The oath has an overt value as part of his charade as loving and outraged uncle, but it also has a psychological utility in the insight it affords to his guilty and haunted consciousness. There is also a dramatic irony in this oath, for in the end Jasper will hold the essential clue, the ring, in his hands, and at that moment the entire truth will emerge. As he himself foreshadows, he will not cease "until I should hold the clue in which to entangle the murderer as in a net" (229). This projection is, of course, merely speculative, but the weight given to the ring and Jasper's oath in the text justify the reader's expectations. At one point, with this object, someone, probably Helena Landless, will elicit a confession from John Jasper. The murderer will prove to have hounded down and trapped himself. Providence will contain and overmaster all of his effort, co-opting Jasper in his own confession. Like Bradley Headstone, who in his desperation to secure all forms of possible discovery unconsciously leaves one route to his guilt open, Jasper's very intensity in the chase will prove his destruction. (The relationship between the plot, Providence and Bradley Headstone in *Our Mutual Friend* will be dealt with fully in the next chapter). This ending exists only speculatively, in the reader's imagination, and there is no opportunity here to delineate its details, even if that were possible, but our consciousness that something like this *must* happen, a sense that is grounded in our readerly understanding of the imperatives of narrative, is undeniable. In the end, then, despite the supremacy of his murder plot, it is providence which plots against John Jasper and defeats him. John Jasper, seeking freedom by corrupt means, only manages to ensnare himself within a web of choices and circumstances which he will not be able to escape. Providence is not always explicable, but there is a moral inevitability in the forces that will eventually close around the murderer.

This may be the moment foreshadowed in the opening and marked by Dickens in his working notes as the "key note 'When the Wicked Man' ——" (383). The keynote, as in a theme in music, suggests Jasper's eventual confession and redemption, the confession that may be the only way out of the fearsome, self imposed binarism, the apartness, of loving uncle and killer. Just as the ring survived the corruption of the body to return to the hand of the murderer as a token of an ineradicable truth, so too the innate goodness of Jasper (whose name, after all, denotes a kind of precious stone) may survive the evil that he commits — the ring becomes a symbol of his immortal soul, and the loving providence that redeems it. Fusco has suggested that John Jasper will not repent (69-70, 79), yet there is already a trace of regret or compassion in his realisation of the true nature of murder in his last visit to the opium den, that suggests a possible repentance, or at least compassion for his victim: "'Look what a poor, mean, miserable thing it is! *That* must be real" (271). Whether Jasper refers to the corpse or the act of murder itself, his comment implies sorrow and recognition of its final futility. Comparison with earlier Dickens novels may be illuminating, but just as Jasper is a more sensitive character than Bradley Headstone, we might reasonably anticipate some new development in Dickens's patterning. In the "keynote" Dickens suggests that Jasper may repent, and near the end of the novel he begins to see the truth of his actions. With the ring in hand, this realisation may become complete.

John Thacker has suggested that the ring also represents the immutable truths of Christian beliefs, submerged in but not destroyed by the distorting body of dogma: "There may well have been an intended and symbolic parallel between the jewel on Drood's body surviving burial and the eternal truth of (Dickens's) Christianity surviving men's efforts to bury it under layers of dogma, ritual, sect and so on, the burial place of each being the Cathedral" (111). The suggestion is enlightening, but Thacker is right to see the religious theme as only one thread in the entire tapestry of the work. The Cathedral, though an important setting for the novel, is not developed as a mysterious institution as, for instance, the Court of Chancery and the Circumlocution Office are. The ring's value as a clue, or symbol, of a buried truth is more than its

status as a token of Christian doctrine, for the very eternity of the ring and the truths it represents are also, as Grewgious notes, a bitter comment on the shallow temporality of life: "'I might imagine that the lasting beauty of these stones was almost cruel'" (144). The providence invested in the ring can bring about justice but not prevent murder. In its almost cruel persistence, the ring represents an uneasy point of negotiation between the processes of life and death. And thus the ring also demonstrates the displacing effect of secularisation, since the moment of providentially determined insight will also be the instant that the secular murder plot is solved. The engagement ring is both a token of love and clue to a murder. Its rediscovery in the Sapsea crypt may symbolically enact the revival of truth in the Cathedral from beneath the weight of dogma and cant, but its significance is broader based than this.

Throughout *Edwin Drood*, the processes of life and death, eternity and temporality, the divine and secular, sit uneasily together. The Cathedral, like Cloisterham, rests upon the world of the dead. Thus, city and Cathedral become stifling, and good characters must flee the tiny town to escape its strictures or else, like Jasper, become prey to their own evil impulses. Yet Dickens also powerfully suggests that a resumption of natural processes can reconcile these oppositions, and that life can arise out of death. The justly famous passage, written only a few hours before the author's death, illustrates this:

> A brilliant morning shines on the old city. Its antiquities and ruins are surpassingly beautiful, with the lasting ivy gleaming in the sun, and the rich trees waving in the balmy air. Changes of glorious light from moving boughs, song of birds, scents from gardens, woods, and fields — or, rather, from the one great garden of the whole cultivated island in its yielding time — penetrate into the Cathedral, subdue its earthy odour, and preach the Resurrection and the Life. The cold stone tombs of centuries ago grow warm, and flecks of brightness dart into the sternest marble corners of the building, fluttering there like wings. (278)

The light still strikes on tombs, and the air merely subdues, and does not obliterate, the earthy odour of death. The gardens outside are still filled with the dust of lost abbots and abbesses. But in the processes of nature, in movement and in change, rest the eternal truths of providence, immutable as a jewel. Mystery illuminates where it

darkens, and sometimes forms shadows where it is illuminated. The final mystery at work through the plot of *Edwin Drood* is the mystery of providence.

2.7. Concluding a Mystery.

A faith in providence and divine justice resembles the reader's faith that, in the unwritten end to *Edwin Drood*, all will be well and the murderer discovered. In the last gestures of the novel, as light penetrates the Cathedral, darker forces, observed by Datchery, close in around John Jasper:

> Mr Datchery looks again to convince himself. Yes, again! As ugly and withered as one of the fantastic carvings on the under brackets of the stall seats, as malignant as the Evil One, as hard as the big brass eagle holding the sacred books upon his wings... [Princess Puffer] hugs herself in her lean arms, and shakes both fists at the leader of the choir. (279)

The demon that John Jasper has carved out of his own soul takes form in order to threaten and incriminate him. Like Datchery, the reader feels in this gesture the beginning of revelation, the edge of truth. But *Edwin Drood* stops here; there is nothing more. We sense that at this point, if we could only interpret, put all the clues in their place, we would know how the novel ends. Thus, *Edwin Drood* is unfinished but complete, and thus the Droodist impulse to root out all the clues and place them in their context is only an exaggerated form of the certainties and speculations of all possible readers of *Edwin Drood.* But Droodist crticism also attempts to draw *Edwin Drood* into the complex of detective fiction without considering Dickens's resistance to overly elaborate construction, his preference for suggestion over concealment, and his interest in the constitution of the criminal intellect. We can, in the power of the double-narrative, see the novel as influential in the development of detective fiction. *Edwin Drood*, following from *The Moonstone*, in its development of a singular crime or enigma, marks the point of termination of the sprawling, multiple mysteries of the novel of urban mystery. Yet we must set aside the elaboration of mechanical mysteries to peer into the metaphysical mysteries of the criminal mind. When *Edwin Drood* is finished, we may at last win through to an understanding of the fascinating, baffling

consciousness of John Jasper, a mind which I have argued is both doubled and unified, torn apart and self-conscious, a superb representation of the psychology of the murderer as something beyond normal human understanding. John Jasper, out of his dark impulses, plots. Though the weight of interest is in the complex presentation of this character, we cannot ignore the dependency of this representation on considerations of plot. As John Jasper plots murder, providence plots against John Jasper, ironically laying the ground for his capture and repentance. That ground is visible to us only as a suggestion, as territory sensed rather than seen. It is a mark like that which Datchery makes: "he opens his corner-cupboard door; takes his bit of chalk from its shelf; adds one thick line to the score, extending from the top of the cupboard-door to the bottom" (280). If we could only decipher that enigmatic score, know what it represents, then we would know the ending of *Edwin Drood.* Like the ring, it is evidence of an eternal truth, waiting to be recovered, a clue which is not the truth itself but only its token, demanding that it be read with fidelity. With this ambiguous sign, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* ends.

3. *Our Mutual Friend*: The Propagation of Mystery.

"Come!" he added, at once persuasively and with authority to the hidden object in the water, as he played the line again; "it's no good this sort of game, you know. You must come up. I mean to have you."

— Mr Inspector.

3.1. Playing the Line with Mr Inspector.

Mr Inspector appears early in *Our Mutual Friend*, a potential model for the mastery of the detective. In his small police station he is first discovered writing: orderly, hieratic and in control of the chaotic elements contained by his cells. We find him "with a pen and ink, and ruler, posting up his books in a whitewashed office, as studiously as if he were in a monastery on top of a mountain, and no howling fury of a drunken woman were banging herself against a cell-door in the back-yard" (66). Like the impeturbable Inspector writing up reports in "The Metropolitan Protectives" (*Hunted Down* 101-22), in his power to illuminate and describe the alien social environment of the riverside, he appears not only as a character but as a type of authorial omniscience, an echo of Mr Bucket's identification with the omniscient voice[24]. But Mr Inspector's powers are swiftly, and alarmingly, curtailed. Responding to the false affidavit sworn by Rogue Riderhood, he undertakes the search for Gaffer Hexam. The Gaffer is found by Riderhood, but he has drowned, and though Mr Inspector can assert his usual mastery to recover the corpse and reconstruct the circumstances of the Gaffer's accident, his power to solve the larger mystery of Gaffer's involvement in the Harmon affair is here ended. In his last appearance, to arrest the man he thinks is guilty of the Harmon murder, he finds that there has been no such murder after all. Indeed, following the posting of the reward in the Harmon murder we have seen the severe limitations of Mr Inspector's supposed omniscience:

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[24]. See section 7.5 in the discussion of *Bleak House*.

> This proclamation rendered Mr Inspector additionally studious, and caused him to stand meditating on river-stairs and causeways, and to go lurking about in boats, putting this and that together. But, according to the success with which you put this and that together, you get a woman and a fish apart, or a Mermaid in combination. And Mr Inspector could turn out nothing better than a Mermaid, which no Judge and Jury would believe in. (74)

Mr Inspector has only a limited success in an urban environment bounded and defined by dangerous mysteries. He is less developed, and even less effectual, than Mr Bucket of *Bleak House*. Though still useful as a guide, he is not the final arbiter of the novel's truths. It is possible to see Mr Inspector as a retrograde step in the development of the detective figure, yet in his next work, *Edwin Drood*, Dickens introduced Datchery, perhaps the first undercover policeman in English literature, who may have proved superior to Mr Inspector and even Mr Bucket.

In the case of Mr Inspector, the thinness of his presence may prompt the question of the status of *Our Mutual Friend* as a work of Dickensian mystery. Fisher Solomon has proposed that there is a case to answer: "The Case of the Missing Detective" in *Our Mutual Friend*. Initially, he observes that there are many mysteries in connection with the assault on John Harmon that are not taken up and pursued by any character functioning as a detective[25]. Mr Inspector is evidently not "missing," but the extent of his role is fundamentally curtailed. In a novel possessing multiple strands of plot, his involvement is limited to one strand. This mystery is abruptly solved and proves, later, to form part of what is, from most readers' point of view, a highly unsatisfactory development of the story. The premature revelation of the details of the Harmon "murder," and the subsequent disappointments of the Boffin deception, call into question the validity of deploying the terminology of mystery here at all. Or, if *Our Mutual Friend* was intended as a work of mystery, Dickens clearly bungled the development of the idea. If Henry James's scathing summary — "it is poor with the poverty not of momentary embarrassment but of permanent exhaustion" (*Criticism* 6) — were true, Dickens might be said to have exhausted his treatment of mystery plots in *Our Mutual Friend*, only to find a new narrative structure, as we have seen, in *Edwin*

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[25]. Solomon's argument and his conclusions are dealt with in more detail in section 3.4.

Drood, which was closer to the conventions of detection. In this case, then, we have the difficulty of navigating from the acknowledged mystery of *Edwin Drood* to the unacknowledged mysteries *Our Mutual Friend.*

Given that we are confronted with the problem of the missing detective and the subsequent dispersal of the energies of mystery through the plot, where can we find mystery in *Our Mutual Friend*? The transition from the tightly coherent mystery of *Edwin Drood* is clearly a test-case for the validity of any approach to Dickensian narrative which must deal comprehensively with mystery. Yet it is the very breadth and depth of the conception of *Our Mutual Friend*, its very opacity to an immediately unifying point of view, which may allow us to rehabilitate our notion of mystery at work here. Daleski, in *Dickens and the Art of Analogy*, observes of *Our Mutual Friend* that the serial structure of the plot is one in which

> what we watch is the expansion of an action that links the body with the doings of an increasing number of characters. The expansion, moreover, is similar to that of the rippling circles in the river in that the characters who become involved in the action are differentiated in terms of social class and... are presented to us in successive groups. (271)

Daleski, as new critic, is subsequently more interested in the concentric development of patterns of imagery throughout the novel than the plot, but as Peter Garret has observed, the analogical structure can enter into a dialectical relationship with the plot structure. As the Harmon mystery moving on the tide creates ramifying and broadening waves of interest (74), the plot of *Our Mutual Friend* is extremely fluid, a complex succession of diffusing causes and effects. The counterpart to this fluid metaphor is the line, such as that which Mr Inspector tugs at to draw the Gaffer to the surface, but the line will also prove to have many strands: those of the multiplot novel. An examination of the strands of plot in *Our Mutual Friend*, beginning with those mysteries introduced in the first book, will lead into a discussion of the analogical structure of the novel, a structure which informs and underlies Dickens's vision of urban mystery. Understanding the function of urban mystery will throw new light on the actions of the characters. In the first place, we observe John Harmon's quest to negotiate a new relationship with mystery, testing the nature of his father's legacy and

Bella. Out of the conclusion of this mystery, we also observe the complex dynamic of mystery, suspense and violence that drives the relationship between Lizzie, Eugene and Bradley Headstone. This concluding plot tends to focus less on urban mystery than mysteries of psychology and providence.

Thus, the singular mystery of *Edwin Drood* is an innovation that arose out of Dickens's treatment of the multiple, urban mysteries of *Our Mutual Friend.* The twofold movement, then, is between the novel of mystery and the mysteries novel, between the rural novel and the sprawling urban novel, and it may be that the innovation of *Edwin Drood* arose out of the near incoherence of the narrative of the previous work. The narrative principle of mystery in *Our Mutual Friend* is what I will call *the propagation of mystery.* Propagation is appropriate to all multi-plotted mysteries, but has a particular resonance for *Our Mutual Friend*, where its effects are most pronounced and the line comes closest to unravelling. Modes of mystery and mystification multiply from an originating cause, the recovery of a corpse from the river, and develop beyond the scope of Mr Inspector, who must be content merely to stand at one end of the line, one point in a mystery plot which expands beyond his knowledge. The following discussion, beginning with a close examination of the mysteries that take form in the first book, will attempt to tug on that line and draw the hidden object of mystery closer to the surface.

3.2. More Mysteries than One in *Our Mutual Friend.*

In *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens moved to the multi-plotted form of his earlier novels after two relatively focused narratives, *Great Expectations* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, employing again the broader format of monthly parts which led to a long, dispersed novel. Dickens had achieved an intense concentration and clean plot in *Great Expectations*, of which he was justifiably proud, but before entering on *Edwin Drood*, a single focus narrative woven about the central problem of its title, he returned to the older form, significantly the form of both *Little Dorrit* and *Bleak House*. The technical

innovation of *Edwin Drood* is, of course, the fact that the central focus arises out of a mystery and its discovery; the one problem is developed throughout. Between *Edwin Drood* (and its mystery) and *Great Expectations*, lies the multi-plotted *Our Mutual Friend.* Though it begins with a powerful sense of mystery, in the form of the corpse of the "man from Somewhere" and the various suspicions that adhere around it, the initiating mystery is swiftly mingled in alternative, and loosely connected, strands of action. In addition, the very mystery which seems to give *Our Mutual Friend* its initial impetus is resolved before half of the narrative is complete.

Our Mutual Friend opens with an oppressive sense of mystery and confusion. A critic such as Beiderwell, in his reading of its first chapter, reiterates the word "mystery" not in any specific sense but simply to emphasise the powerful atmosphere of suspense that the opening generates. The non-specificity of the first paragraph — "concerning the exact year there is no need to be precise" (43) — is similar to the spatial and temporal vagaries of the opening of *Edwin Drood*, the fog of *Bleak House* or the mist of *A Tale of Two Cities*, and leads into a scene of mystery, uncertainty and horror, as Lizzie Hexam and her father, the Gaffer, retrieve from the Thames a corpse which is never explicitly referred to by the text yet is present as an object of violence and dread. Riderhood's accusations, his veiled threats of informing, come near the end of this scene, rounding out an ominous beginning.

An abrupt shift marks the opening of the next chapter, perhaps initiating that sense of sharp discontinuities which is typical of the experience of reading *Our Mutual Friend.* There are many subtle analogical connections between the first two chapters[26], but the organic plot connection, some cause-and-effect reason why the scene should shift to the Veneerings, is not apparent. To some degree narrative omniscience, conceived of here as readerly faith in the author's unity of vision, mitigates against any sense that we are dealing in irrelevancies, and the satire of this scene is engaging, but the objective connection between the opening chapter and the Veneerings is simply that

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[26]. For examples of this sort of reading see Beiderwell and Greenstein.

Mortimer is the solicitor in the Harmon will. Mortimer's entry into the conversation is necessitated by nothing more than Lady Tippins bringing up the subject of the "man from Somewhere" (57) by chance. Mortimer narrates the Harmon case up to the present, and there seems to be an authorial awareness of the arbitrary nature of this exposition: "'We must now return, as the novelists say, and we all wish they wouldn't, to the man from Somewhere'" (57). This self-conscious gesture emphasises the arbitrariness of this exposition, since at this very moment both Mortimer and Eugene will be called away to pursue the problem of the man from Somewhere. The trip down to the riverside and the police station (the domain of Mr Inspector) is another sharp transition between locations.

In two chapters we have begun, or at least encountered the main participants in, three plots: the Harmon mystery, the Lizzie and Eugene plot, and the Veneerings plot. We see how mysteries begin to propagate as multiple strands of story are attached to the one event, the discovery of a corpse. The first number of *Our Mutual Friend* executes another abrupt spatial and social shift when it closes with the R. Wilfer family, who are intimately involved with the first plot. Eventually, the story of the Wilfers will intersect with the Boffins: more plots. We have, by now, toured across a virtual cross-section of Victorian society, but the links Dickens has established are diffuse, and the connections are based on mutuality of acquaintance. The relationships are complex but rather thin, since it is hard to see how one milieu may convincingly affect another.

One mystery, and the story surrounding it, dominates these otherwise disparate worlds and sets of characters: the Harmon murder. Dickens's tidal simile shows how it affects a number of locations:

> Thus, like the tides on which it had been borne to the knowledge of men, the Harmon Murder — as it came to be popularly called — went up and down, ebbed and flowed, now in the town, now in the country, now among palaces, now among hovels, now among lords, ladies and gentle folk, now among labourers and hammerers and ballast-heavers, until at last, after a long interval of slack water it got out to sea and drifted away. (74)

The mystery propagates as it moves into society, activating speculation at different levels. It is in that sense of wide circulation and eventual drifting away that the mystery

in *Our Mutual Friend*, strongly felt yet widely cast at the beginning, comes to escape us.

The Harmon murder overshadows the first book of *Our Mutual Friend.* The body, viewed in the first chapters with Mr Inspector, presents no forensic evidence. It is a mysterious object: "No clue to how body came into the river. Very often was no clue" (67). The mystery propagates as it associates itself with the enigmatic figure of Rokesmith/Handford, whom Bella Wilfer suspects of murder: "'Pa... we have got a Murderer for a tenant'" (83). The suspicion of the Harmon murder also gathers around Gaffer Hexam: "'Do you know the suspicions to which your father makes himself liable? Do you know the suspicions that are actually about, against him?'" asks Miss Abbey of Lizzie (111). Should we suspect, as Dickens anticipated in the postscript, that Rokesmith is, in fact, the living John Harmon, the circumstances of the murder, our anxiety about Harmon's actions and motives, the shadow of guilt that falls over Gaffer, are all sufficient to argue that *Our Mutual Friend* has drawn us into multiple, propagating mysteries.

These tensions that the Harmon murder produces run through the remarkable chapters from "The Sweat of an Honest Man's Brow" to "The Bird of Prey Brought Down" (190-225). Significantly, these chapters are Mr Inspector's most remarkable outing. As quest and pursuit, the tension is maintained throughout these chapters. Dickens ended a number after "Tracking the Bird of Prey," thus holding the readers' involvement over separate instalments. The riverside setting is powerfully imagined with a mix of realism and intense, fantastic description:

> The blast went by, and the moon contended with the fast-flying clouds, and the wild disorder reigning up there made the pitiful tumults on the streets of no account. It was not that the wind had swept all the brawlers into places of shelter, as it had swept the hail still lingering in heaps wherever there was refuge for it; but that it seemed the streets were absorbed by the sky, and the night were all in the air. (204)

The search itself is fascinating, and Mr Inspector shows his command of the situation and mastery of the environment: "Mr Inspector, hastily fortifying himself with another glass, strolled out with a noiseless foot and an unoccupied countenance. As one might

go to survey the weather and the general aspects of the heavenly bodies" (209). His analysis of Gaffer's death (222-223) is a masterpiece of deduction and reconstruction. But this passage of mysterious questing and discovery is also the point where the Harmon mystery begins to fracture. Gaffer is eliminated as a living suspect. The Lizzie and Eugene plot is initiated by these events, in a few scenes of haunting, almost fairy-tale, intensity, as Lizzie holds her vigil for her father, briefly observed by Eugene. In initiating yet another plot, the mystery continues to propagate and mutate.

In the second book the plot which begins here takes on greater prominence, as we are introduced to Bradley Headstone and the "riddle" of Eugene's intentions. Other plots, such as those of the Lammles and Podsnaps, or the Boffins and Wegg, propagate and resolve themselves as well, but the Harmon mystery has weakened, seemingly exhausted, so much so that Stephen Gill, in his introduction to the Penguin Edition, can claim that "the Harmon plot is the albatross around Dickens's neck" (22). Before the end of the second book, "A Solo and a Duett" (421-35), the Harmon mystery and disguise plot, a major strand, breaks.

The chapter before-hand is a promising example of detection[27]. John Harmon, disguised, enters the "deep and dark" (405) Limehouse hole, retracing the scene of the crime and searching for the means to vindicate Gaffer Hexam on behalf of his children. Harmon's journey is a rehearsal and a re-enactment of the original crime, a return, as it were, to the primal scene. Like a detective, Harmon uses the technique of disguise and the trap of the knife on Rogue Riderhood to extract a confession. However, the situation is not true to our common notions of detection, since the detective is also the victim, and in possession of, not searching for, the facts of the crime: "'I alone know... the mysteries of that crime,'" (417) Harmon tells Riderhood. This is partly a bluff; Harmon does not know all the details, otherwise he would not be there, but his search for answers is aided by his prior knowledge. In this strange condition as detective and witness, victim and avenger, Harmon attempts to reconstruct the crime against him: "I

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27. Though Solomon argues that Harmon only *appears* to act as a detective, while in fact subverting the process (42). As we shall see, this is also true to some extent.

have never been here since that night, and never was here before that night, but thus much I recognise. I wonder which way did we take when we came out of that shop" (421). Thus far, at least, Harmon maintains our sense of mystery in undertaking this search for answers, probing the physical locale of the events that affect him while simultaneously reconstructing his own memories.

Up to this point the narrative has been consistent with our understanding of mystery narrative. As in the double-narrative, the true nature of the crime remains hidden, while its consequences are visible to us in clues and residual suspicions. Slowly, the investigatory narrative moves towards the moment of revelation, the explanation which describes the second, originating narrative, the true events involving the crime. This is what we would expect of *Edwin Drood*, if it were finished. But in *Our Mutual Friend* the double-narrative is apparently collapsed by John Harmon's soliloquy half-way through the novel. Harmon's long-winded confession effectively pre-empts the characteristic ending in which all the details of the crime and its detection are brought out in a complete accounting, and so there is a collapse in the propagation of this strand.

Harmon's soliloquy ends the Harmon mystery. He acquaints us, like the title of the following chapter, with the whole case so far. We are presented with the history of his return to England and the circumstances of his presumed murder. Some subsidiary matters raised by this account are left out, but there is insufficient interest in these matters to make us imagine that there is some further mystery here worth pursuing[28]. Indeed, if they are not pointed out to us, we are hardly aware of them. The method of exposition, a monologue in which Harmon recounts to himself facts with which he is familiar — "Don't evade it, John; don't evade it; think it out!" (423) — strikes us as clumsy. Furthermore, because we expect the conclusion of the double-narrative to come at the end of the novel, we feel cheated, prematurely let into the details of a story that we imagined would be assembled in another manner. It is as if

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[28]. See Solomon 36, for an account of mysteries in the Harmon affair which are not followed up. This also is dealt with later in this chapter.

John Jasper had confessed in the middle of *Edwin Drood*, or Mrs Clennam had blurted out the whole story halfway through *Little Dorrit*.

If we appear to be ejected from mystery in this plot, subsequent mystery plots appear to take over our interest. Reading becomes a subtle discriminating process, detecting in the flourishing text the threads of new mysteries. One of these is the "friendly move" initiated before Harmon's confessional soliloquy but increasing in importance to the reader as we see Boffin slide into miserliness. There are, indeed, further mysteries here, such as the contents of the dutch-bottle excavated from the dust heaps. At the point where the friendly move is originated, Wegg's envious resentment of Boffin is located in an ironic sense of mystery as Wegg announces, "'Mystery... I don't like it, Mr Venus. I don't like to have the life knocked out of former inhabitants of this house, in the gloomy dark, and not know who did it'" (352). Wegg's search for answers to this facetiously imagined crime may be a kind of parody of other types of detection in the novel, but the mystery is potentially a genuine one, just as Mr Venus's powers of manipulation and articulation — "[his] patient habits and delicate manipulations... his skill in piecing little things together... his knowledge of various tissues and textures" (357) — qualify him as Wegg's surrogate detective in sorting through the dustheaps. Sorting, discriminating, articulating: these are the sorts of reading and detection required of the reader now. Like Mr Venus, as the mystery plots propagate we find ourself in possession of an increasingly dispersed text, a text that we must reassemble and thread together, as bones are threaded with wires. The novel presents us, indeed, with a variety of tissues and textures, but the pieces are not yet all present, as more mysteries arise.

Our attention is drawn to the plot of Lizzie and Eugene, now that the potential violence of Bradley Headstone has been drawn in to complicate matters. As already observed, the pursuit of Gaffer Hexam is a high point in the Harmon murder plot, but these chapters also initiate the relationship between Eugene and Lizzie. It is remarkable that the participants in this section, though ostensibly detectives in the Harmon problem, are the main characters in an entirely different strand of the plot. This

emphasises the principle of narrative propagation: the overt mystery has been the Harmon mystery, but it is transformed into the medium in which another story is initiated. The Lizzie-Eugene-Headstone plot develops smoothly towards the end of the novel, powerfully drawing our concern in its psychological intensity. Stephen Gill calls it "the commanding success of the novel" (25). It contains the elements of mystery and concealment, develops a strong sense of suspense, involves the reader in pursuit and violence, and ultimately moves into murder and blackmail, as later discussion will show.

Thus, mysteries can be seen to disperse and propagate, replicating themselves in new stories apart from the originating plot-stem. In the plot of *Our Mutual Friend* Dickensian mystery persists strongly only through its parts, and not in its whole. Dickens uses mystery, characteristically, to build up suspense, but does not sustain the thread of a single mystery plot throughout the novel. His suspense technique is superb. For instance, in "The Bird of Prey Brought Down" (223), Eugene disappears at a crucial moment. We are not told where and why he went (he went to tell the news to Lizzie) until the next number. Similarly, Lizzie Hexam herself disappears at the end the last number of the second book and is not discovered before the number after that. But in all of these cases Dickens does not maintain tension throughout the entirety of the narrative but only across a few of its numbers. His suspense technique is effective in the short term but not sustained. Instead, we are constantly confronted with new mysteries and new sources of anxiety. Where *Edwin Drood* was singular, *Our Mutual Friend* is multiple and fractured. Mysteries propagate throughout, but each event is short-lived, though it gives rise to further instances of mystery. Dickens appears not to write for the novel as a whole but for its serial parts, as if his concern was not to draw you to the end of the entire narrative but persuade you to buy the next part. This appears to contradict Dickens's own postscript, in which he insists that the novel was written with an eye to an overall design (893-4). Thus, the consistency of design in *Our Mutual Friend* is evident not in a plot that is always metamorphosing but in a broader pattern of recurrences, similarities and differences. The only possible

coherence in *Our Mutual Friend*, then, resides not in plot as action but in setting. The urban world is the unifying scene for all of these mysteries, but its structures are not the structures of plot but of analogy.

3.3. Urban Mystery in *Our Mutual Friend.*

The experience of the reader of *Our Mutual Friend* is one of suspense and anxiety. As we read, our attention is constantly drawn to new mysteries, minor enigmas, the plight of sympathetic characters. But these mysteries are subject to what I have described as the propagation of mystery. As soon as one mystery is passed for us, we are confronted by another. Such a narrative is incoherent and confusing. J. Hillis Miller effectively summarised this sense of a fractured and discontinuous world in an often-quoted passage in his *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels*:

> *Our Mutual Friend* might be compared to cubist collage. Its structure is formed by the juxtaposition of incompatible fragments in a pattern of disharmony or mutual contradiction. Apparently, then, *Our Mutual Friend* is a multi-plotted novel presenting a collection of unrelated lives each fulfilling itself privately, enclosed in its own personal world. The novel seems to be a large group of impenetrable milieus with characters buried untouchably at the centres. The milieus exist side by side, but do not organize themselves into a larger whole. (284)

This assertion clearly communicates the reader's sense that the links between social worlds developed in *Our Mutual Friend* are merely tangentially causal, and often weak, if they intercept at all. The argument that follows, however, will attempt to reconstruct some sense of coherency.

The search for coherence in *Our Mutual Friend* usually abandons the plot structure for the analogical structure. Reading drops causal linkages in favour of symbolic, thematic or lexical similarities. However, it is not always desirable to see these structures separately. As Peter Garret has argued, analogical structure is not, necessarily, a thing apart from plot structure. Instead, it is possible to discern a constant dialectical relationship between the two. Though plot and analogical structures can never be exactly parallel, and would resist mutual substitution, they can draw

narrative complexes (the worlds and events of remote sets of characters) together. As Garret directs us: "My particular concern here is with the way analogies can function as causal connections within and between narrative lines.... such connections can replace directly dramatic relations between characters and worlds" (45). However, Garret warns against one-to-one matching of these structures: "Of course, Dickens' major multi-plot novels develop extensive causal as well as thematic connections, and it may not seem necessary or even possible to choose between them; but even when the two principles are working quite closely together, they never coincide" (45). In Dickens's writing we are familiar with his version of the pathetic fallacy, in which characters come to influence the physical elements around them, and vice versa. By the same token, the environment and the analogous responses it elicits can be linked with causal, plot-like, conditions. Thus, the mechanical mysteries that propagate through *Our Mutual Friend* are, like the superficial verbal clues through which John Jasper hints at his inner nature, clues in turn to the deep metaphysical and analogical mysteries of *Our Mutual Friend.*

It may be hard to say which analogical structure dominates the city. Is it the dustheaps, the mountains of refuse that overlook the London of *Our Mutual Friend*, or is it the River Thames, which flows, an emblem of life and death, throughout its precincts? There is a constant process of exchange between these disparate locales. The river itself, like the dustheaps, becomes a receptacle for refuse, as the narrative draws us "down by Ratcliffe, and by Rotherhithe; down by where accumulated scum of humanity seemed to be washed from higher grounds, like so much moral sewerage" (63). As a receptacle for human trash the river is a type of Mr Venus's shop, where human body parts form a chaotic collection of objects "'human warious'" (130). Mr Venus's shop is itself a trash-heap, over which Mr Venus can assert a kind of mastery, but the masses of body parts drawn in and first dis-articulated by his art (as the ribs are collected, disassembled and sorted into separate grades) point towards the dehumanising powers of the river. As the bills describing anonymous victims of drowning that are plastered on Gaffer Hexam's walls make clear, the river is the point

where the subject's identity may be irrevocably dispersed. Such structures, then, are interrelated, and their characteristic influences are anonymity, corruption and decay. For example, Jenny Wren alarmingly threatens to leave her alcoholic father outside so that he can be collected along with the rest of the dust (595). For the human subject, then, within this city dominated by the dustheaps and the river, whose corrosive powers are the same, loss of identity (to become merely a paper of Gaffer Hexam's wall) is a primary terror. Human beings, then, can be rendered into objects, and objects themselves are reduced to dust, trash, decay, so that all objects, conscious and unconscious, lose definition and purpose. In the urban environment they become mysterious because they are anonymous, as the corpses of the drowned render no clues as to who they were or how they got into the water. And though the river ultimately passes beyond the city, transcending its bounds, in its passage through the city its main aspect is that of corruption and decay.

Our Mutual Friend begins with a drowned man, identified and yet not identified (the body gives no clues). The object that is the first cause of mystery recovered from the river is a human body. Though it is assumed to be John Harmon, no one can affirm this, and the continuity of the mystery relies on the chance of mis-identification, as well as the problem of how it got to be there at all. The body is also a commercial subject; for the river scavengers it is the source of a "living" that is not itself wealth. Further depersonalised, the corpse becomes merely the reward for its recovery, or the contents of its pockets. It is necessary to return to those opening chapters to pursue these analogies and examine those same mysteries of identity in the world of the Veneerings.

The Veneerings are, in this manner, mysterious: they have no prior origins and no absolute identity. For Twemlow, this lack of origins generates an enigma: "the abyss to which he could find no bottom, and from which started forth the engrossing question and ever-swelling difficulty of his life, was the insoluble question whether he was Veneering's oldest friend or newest friend" (49). The Veneerings are persons of surface, of mere appearance, and their provenance is a kind of mystery of vacuity.

Significantly they are introduced as reflections: a mirror "Reflects Veneering, forty, wavy-haired, dark, tending to corpulence, sly, mysterious, filmy" (52). Veneering society is superficial and de-centred. The Veneering table is dominated by the replicated Veneering camels, a new and recently invented heraldic family crest, an elegant falsehood, while the Veneerings themselves are always marginalised in conversation, never directly addressed by their own guests. In this, they bear a strong resemblance to Mr Merdle, the financier of *Little Dorrit*, whose riches are also built on an unsupported platform of speculation. Their source of wealth is enigmatic, a signifier without significance. Veneering deals in the City, and his riches are therefore like that "mysterious paper currency that circulates in London when the wind blows" (191). The urban mystery that emerges here is the mystery of the position of the self in the city and society. We cannot discern where these people came from; they are like signs without signifieds, or clues without objects, and so in their presence we find ourselves drawn into an inter-referential order, confusing and erosive. The Veneering world is temporarily self-sufficient, but it is without meaning.

In the Veneering world falseness obscures authentic identity, or its lack. *Our Mutual Friend* is dense with human beings who are either disguised, have no true identity, or are merely cyphers, reduced to their own functionality. Thus, the dinner party organised by the hollow Veneerings is attended by "the Member, the Engineer, the Payer-off of the National Dept, the Poem on Shakespeare, the Grievance and the Public Office" (49), who, like the interchangeable Boots and Brewer, have no reality outside their nominated positions in society. Furthermore, characters present themselves in disguised or falsified aspects. The Lammles deceive each other — "'we have both been deceiving, and we have both been deceived'" (172) — and go on to mutually reserve their deceptions in order to entrap others: "'We have pretended well enough to one another. Can't we, united, pretend to the world? Agreed'" (172). Such deceptions are menacing; they lead to entrapment and coercion, as the manipulative Wegg presents himself to Boffin as literary man and friend. Fledgeby, concealing his own identity behind the firm of Pubsey and Co. — names hidden behind names —

relegates the role of debt collector to Riah, and Riah himself is compromised by the false anti-semitic characteristics attributed to his race, and is even forced to admit his complicity in this state. Thus, the intermittent exchange of personal identities has a distorting effect over the whole of society.

Victorian urban society, the structure of its commercial relationships, enforces these distortions on the human identity, driving it to become inherently mysterious, concealed, directionless. The loss of identity within the urban and commercial structure is the process of reification, in which the human subject is drawn into the mechanisms of capitalistic exchange; the process Solomon describes as "the reifying effect of a capitalist economy... the way in which it transforms all things, subjects as well as objects, into a system of exchangeable commodities" (39), a system, we might add, which is fundamentally mysterious because it is both all encompassing and occlusive. We see the City (Veneering's "workplace," where he does no actual work), the site of economic power, identified with the city. *Our Mutual Friend* locates urban mystery at this juncture of personality. Lammle, the false gentleman, makes his (theoretical) money out of shares. He is engaged in a mysterious process of exchange in which human identity is linked to commercial practise:

> As is well known to the wise in their generation, traffic in Shares is the one thing to have to do with in this world. Have no antecedents, no established character, no cultivation, no ideas, no manners; have shares. Have shares enough to be on Boards of Directors in capital letters, oscillate on mysterious business between London and Paris, and be great. Where does he come from? Shares. Where is he going to? Shares. What are his tastes? Shares. Has he any principles? Shares. What are his tastes? Shares. What squeezes him into Parliament? Shares. (159-60).

The answer to the reiterated questions is no more than a medium of exchange. Shares become character, morals, politics, power. Shares, like all forms of paperwork, circulate throughout the city, indicate nothing of value on their own but become a kind of mobile trash: "That mysterious paper currency that circulates in London when the wind blows" (191). Human beings, like the shares they manipulate in a mysterious manner, come to have no identity outside of the marketplace.

No one institution, like Chancery or the Circumlocution Office, embodies this mystery, unless that institution is the entirety of the Victorian social order. There is, in *Our Mutual Friend*, no one geographical locus of institutional abuse, though characters must face evil in many different forms. Even Dickens's attack on the poor laws lacks a strong focus in the form of an administering body. Thus, the mystery of identity in *Our Mutual Friend* is profoundly personal and frighteningly public, invested in personality which is itself shown to be compromised and distorted by the social conditions surrounding it. Thus, at its most extreme, we find Bradley Headstone, whose constructed selfhood is figured along the lines of a commercial warehouse:

> From his early childhood up, his mind had been a place of mechanical stowage. The arrangement of his wholesale warehouse, so that it might always be ready to meet the demands of retail dealers — history here, geography there, astronomy to the right, political economy to the left — natural history, the physical sciences, figures, music, the lower mathematics, and what not, all in their several places — (267)

His ideas, knowledge, his entire mental economy, is shown to be metaphorically similar to the arrangements of commerce. As Humpherys notes of the urban mysteries novel, there is a "blurring of agencies" (459). In *Our Mutual Friend*, at the end of the period of the urban mysteries novel, we find a further blurring between public and private agency. In *Edwin Drood*, the movement towards personal mystery was almost completed, and certainly intensified in the complexities of the mind of John Jasper. In *Our Mutual Friend* individual personal action still assumes the patterns of larger social institutions.

To redirect attention to the links between the analogical shape of the novel and its plot, we can see that many of the dominant types of action in *Our Mutual Friend*, the assumption of false identities, the taking of disguises, deception and coercion, are related to this notion of mystery. For many of the main characters, their anxiety is the anxiety of their progress through the social systems defined by the analogical structure. This is an anxiety that the readers experiences with them. What is our true self? How is it related to society? And, most importantly, how can one advance through society and still retain one's essential nature? To Dickens, the self-made man, this formed the

problem of the upwardly-mobile individual, a person facing the disjunction represented by the city between the old verities of tradition and position and the new secular potentialities of the expanding economy. If to assume our place in society is to take on a purely reflexive identity, like that of the Veneerings, how can we make ourselves? John Harmon, returning to England, fears assuming an identity prepared for him by the corrupting power of his father's wealth: "I came back, timid, divided in my mind, afraid of myself and everybody here, knowing of nothing but wretchedness that my father's wealth had ever brought about" (423). This same anxiety is evident in the character of Lizzie Hexam. She cannot answer how she may become a lady while her authentic self is still maintained by her relationship to the past: "'I a lady! I, a poor girl who used to row poor father on the river'" (403). Her questions and uncertainties are woven back into the mysterious stain of the Harmon murder: "'I, a lady! I, with poor father's grave not even cleared of undeserved stain and shame, and he trying to clear it for me! I, a lady!'" (404). Yet even when this objection is overcome, the reiterated difficulty in linking the self, "I," with the identity of "a lady" remains.

Lizzie Hexam's need to maintain a coherent selfhood is at one with Betty Higden's proud self-sufficiency. The old woman's integrity is realised in her insistence that she must remain a whole individual: "It ain't that I mean to give offence by being anyways proud... but that I want to be of a piece like, and helpful of myself right through to my death" (441). Since Betty Higden and Lizzie Hexam are both charged with the appearance of being proud, it is appropriate that one should meet her death in the arms of the other. By keeping about her the physical means of ensuring her proper burial in substantial pennies and not notes, Betty Higden holds together her selfhood, of a piece. The development of the Lizzie and Eugene plot, as much as any other in the novel, is driven by these contesting determinations of social advancement and selfhood, just as the Boffin-Harmon plot is. Through the analogical structure, we see how the mystery of the city is the mystery of personal identity within a reifying commercial society, and these are the problems that shape the development of the plot. Lizzie Hexam, confronted by her thankless brother, the suppressed violence of Bradley

Headstone, and Eugene, a lover with equally little knowledge of his true self, has good reason to fear that the personality may dissolve when immersed in the mysterious economies of the city. This mystery, which adheres through *Our Mutual Friend*, is a mystery both of plot and the analogical structure, and points towards its hidden unities.

3.4. Negotiating Mystery.

The characters of *Our Mutual Friend* have as much reason to fear mystery as pursue it, and as much reason to evade falsifying identities as assume them. Harmon's detective-like quest for his own identity and the means of vindicating Gaffer Hexam in Limehouse Hole is balanced by Headstone's assumption of the dress of Rogue Riderhood in order to carry out a murder. Boffin's assumed disguise as a miser is paralleled by Silas Wegg's trailing him to find a missing Harmon will. The Harmon murder, the mystery of the identity of a body, foregrounds in *Our Mutual Friend* the problem of disguise and identity, the question of the terms of our relationship with mystery. The pursuit of mystery is far from always a positive engagement with the world, and part of the problem with *Our Mutual Friend* is that the methodology of mysteries — disguise, pursuit, the tracing of clues — is used freely by characters we admire, or despise, or are neutral towards. To some degree, characters must resist urban mystery rather than surrender themselves to its obliterating powers. They must find or negotiate some sort of balance with mystery, since to throw oneself entirely into it seems to risk immurement in its falsehoods, or worse, dehumanisation in the grip of urban mysteries of vacuity.

J. Fisher Solomon has argued for the importance of resisting mystery in "Realism, Rhetoric, and Reification: Or the Case of the Missing Detective in *Our Mutual Friend*." Solomon begins by focusing on the collapse of the Harmon mystery; that is "searching for the 'mystery' that never quite gets off the ground and for possible reasons for its sudden grounding" (36). To Solomon, though Harmon retraces the scene of the crime against him, various questions, valid potential mysteries, remain

unanswered, such as, "who, for instance, is the 'black man' in steward's dress who serves Harmon the doctored coffee, and had he an active role in the matter? Who are the men who struggle over Harmon's valise as he lies insensate on the floor? Was Riderhood among them?" (36). Solomon's conclusions are telling. Since he eventually associates mystery with urban reification there are, as I have argued above, necessarily mysteries which must be resisted or ignored. However, the mysteries he posits as mysteries that never got off the ground are not a useful point of departure. The questions he poses seem important to the reader only when they are pointed out. They do not engage our interest or our anxiety largely because as we see the mystery being uncovered by Harmon's narration, the points which are salient to our understanding of *Our Mutual Friend* are being answered. Instead, they represent the sort of trivial or mechanical mystification that Dickens purposefully resisted. The important point is that John Rokesmith is John Harmon, and the interest this generates. The deep mysteries persist in those very acts of resistance against mystery which Solomon points out, in John Harmon's struggle to reach some sort of mastery of his own mysteries.

John Harmon does not pursue the other mechanical mysteries, but this does not mean that mystery is altogether abandoned. As Harmon assumes a disguise in order to probe the scene of his memories, he attempts to renegotiate his relationship with mystery. Harmon, in his plunge into the river, indeed in his return to London, faces the dissolution of his personality: "I could not have said that my name was John Harmon — I could not have thought it — I didn't know it —" (426). Against this transforming effect, a subject like John Harmon must assert his stable subjectivity, his identity as named self: "'This is John Harmon drowning! John Harmon, struggle for you life. John Harmon, call on Heaven and save yourself!'" (426). But though John Harmon regains "himself," he also assumes, as quickly, the false name of an imagined other: "the thought entered my head of turning the danger I had passed through, to the account of being for some time supposed to have disappeared mysteriously" (427). We could reverse this statement to say that John Harmon disappears mysteriously within

himself; as much as John Harmon resists mystery, at this point in this narrative he also goes on to embrace it. He speaks of this being "my mystery" (428). Thus, in opposition to the impersonal mysteries of reification, of dissolution in the city, John Harmon asserts the power of his knowledge over his personal mystery.

By retaining a control over his singular mystery, he has access to other sources of knowledge. We see him assert his command over the Harmon fortune not as inheritor but as steward and secretary. In effect, Harmon takes control over the commercial world that he initially fears to re-enter. We have seen how John Harmon assumes the part of the detective in Limehouse Hole, but the end of this adventure is only the first stage in the trials of the acolyte-detective. Later, he must move from being the passive victim of others' knowledge and power to the position of the initiate whose own knowledge is potentially a force in the world. Harmon's journey from acolyte to initiate is not as problematic as that of other Dickensian heroes, such as Pip or Arthur Clennam, perhaps because his own secret identity has already partly involved him in the economy of concealment that marks the status of the initiate (see section 1.3). In the first place, he comes into the control of the Harmon fortune: "He showed no love of patronage or the command of money, but distinctly preferred resigning both to Mr Boffin. If, in his limited sphere, he sought power, it was the power of knowledge; the power derivable from a perfect comprehension of his business" (241). This power of knowledge is in fact no minor faculty. His command over the business of the dustheaps verges, analogically, on command over the city itself. In order to resist the reifying force of capital, John Harmon tests the nature of his fortune through impersonal knowledge of it.

In the second case, Bella Wilfer is put to the test. Bella must be investigated and proved as though she were a mysterious subject, a real identity hidden beneath her commercialised self. Under the terms of the Harmon will she is commodified, the price of John Harmon's ascension to his father's fortune, and so his mysterious disappearance is the means by which to determine the truth of her nature. Bella is not only tested but repeatedly tested, first in the scene in which Boffin dismisses his

secretary, and secondly at the return of Mr Inspector into the story. In both cases, the aim is to reveal her innate goodness, to draw out the truth of her being from beneath the corrupting influence of money and her self-professed greed. As Mrs Boffin, describing the motives for the deception, explains: "'She may be a leetle spoilt... by circumstances, but that's only the surface, and I lay my life... that she's the true golden gold at heart'" (843). The challenge, then, has been to prove this inference, to discern by a test the real Bella Wilfer: "'"Prove it, John!" we says,' repeated Mrs Boffin. "'Prove it and overcome your doubts with triumph and be happy for the first time in your life'"" (843). Bella Wilfer passes the test, not once, but twice, and her second triumph, the test by which we gain absolute knowledge, is that final challenge to her husband which comes through the disclosure of his mystery.

The originating mystery of the Harmon murder, turned over to the reader, is applied again as the final test to Bella. It is in this trial that the Harmons are freed from mystery. The arrival of Mr Inspector to arrest John Rokesmith, after he is seen by chance by Mortimer Lightwood, is a kind of enactment of the suspicions that still cling around the Harmon murder. Harmon's maintaining his false identity is the last loose thread of the text, the last barrier before his step into his real identity, the last test for Bella. As John Harmon himself (and the reader) now hold the truth to the mystery, his arrest is the final purgation of that mystery, the final gesture that dissolves and resolves its powers and anxieties. Bella is tested; she will be found to be true. Thus, before the mystery is finally clarified by the last intervention of Mr Inspector, Bella thinks to herself again:

> What could be the depths of that mystery of John's? Why was it that he had never been seen by Mr Lightwood, whom he still avoided? When would the trial come, through which her faith in, and her duty to, her dear husband, was to carry her, rendering him triumphant? (822)

Bella's truth is weighed against the depths of the Harmon mystery, and it is Bella's own depth which responds and triumphs, while at the same time John Harmon, by manipulating the mystery he has been complicit in since the beginning, by assenting to his own arrest and unveiling, finally frees himself of mystery. At this point, then, the

narrative both delineates and closes with urban mystery, exposing and then dissolving the last of the problematics that surround the Harmon disappearance.

Though in one sense we are inside the details of Bella's test, because we know the depths of the mystery which she cannot, we are in another way outside of this test, because we, like Bella, are deceived by Mr Boffin's transformation. Two mysteries operate side by side, one which is totally visible to us, and one which is concealed to such an extent that we fail to anticipate its existence. In retrospect, it is important that the Boffins remain uncorrupted by the wealth in their hands. Throughout *Our Mutual Friend* their truth and fidelity in the possession of money are emphasised. Like Bella, they have a core of integrity that is shown to be immune to the capitalist order in which they find themselves immersed. Mr Boffin (partly through the protection of his secretary) is not submerged in the "dismal swamp" of beggars and speculators attracted to his wealth. Yet the reader, like Bella, believes in the actuality of Mr Boffin's fall. What quality is it in us that is tested by this reversal, or do we fail the test? It may be that Dickens's employment of authorial omniscience is at fault. The reader, having the secret knowledge of one mystery, fails to anticipate that we might be completely outside another. We know that Rokesmith is Harmon, and therefore fail to anticipate that Boffin may not be a Dancer. Like Silas Wegg, a parodic detective, we find our assumption of knowledge severely and shockingly reversed. Wegg presumes on the basis of his own discoveries, his spying on and searching out of Boffin, to have power over him. As readers, spying on Boffin through Wegg's perceptions, we are to this degree taken in by Wegg's suspicions, and so surprised. Wegg's summary of Boffin's condition — "'He's grown too fond of money'"(565) is a judgement we too readily accept. Nevertheless, like many characters in *Our Mutual Friend*, we are taken by surprise at the confession of the Boffin plot. This confession is itself like the solution to a double-narrative: it locates and accounts for, in a remarkably different light, everything that has gone before it. Just as Mr Inspector himself has met a reversal of knowledge, the reader confronts a failure of their powers of inference.

All knowledge, then, is bound by the possibility of failure, as are all forms of knowing in *Our Mutual Friend.* Characters' attempts to come to terms with the world, through disguise, plotting or designing, are both positive and negative, and in each case their understanding is hemmed in by mystery. At the moment when the Boffin detection is revealed to us, or at the moment when Mr Inspector learns that John Rokesmith is John Harmon, both readers and characters must confront this uneasy possibility. As Audrey Jaffe observes: "it is precisely at the moment of surprise, when we become aware of how misled we have been, that we glimpse the potential depth of our insecurity — the possible existence, always, of knowledge that we haven't got" (97). The Harmon mystery tends towards closure, by which I mean that the mystery surrounding John Harmon is entirely discharged, but at the very moment that mystery is resolved, where it finds the point of negotiation with the world, we find a point where our understanding is shown to have been limited, contained, by a new iteration of mystery, the uncertainty upon which all understanding is contingent. There is a kind of categorical openness outside of the plot in the possibility that every form of knowledge is vulnerable to an unexpected, surprising inversion.

This is not, however, intended as an apology for the Boffin reversal. The startling effect it has on the reader's self-perceptions is not salubrious, partly because, as Jaffe points out, we are both disappointed and confused by the moment of revelation (99). Our confusion arises partly out of our difficulty in deciding whether we have been bad readers, for misinterpreting the clues, or Dickens has been a bad narrator, for misinterpreting how well we would read his clues. If, as Dickens insists in the postscript, he may be trusted to know what he is about, we can only conclude that we have been bad readers. But as bad readers we are in the company of a character such as Mr Inspector, at least. At the point we find the Harmon mystery contained, we already begin to lose interest in it. In the working through of the Harmon plot, Dickens has shown clearly the limits of containment as well as the possibilities of negotiation with mystery, but the Harmon plot is also resolved within the commercial sphere of Victorian society. If Todorov's formulation of plot resolution, "the passage from one

equilibrium to another" (111), is true in this case, we find that Harmon has, indeed, finally returned to take up the wife and the inheritance he was offered by the beginning. If the plot, as discussed in the first chapter, is in many ways a discursive movement between fixed and similar points, then the Harmon plot is guided here to the solution of the mystery within the social order it partly challenges. This is unsatisfying for the reader and also for Dickens. Aware of the vulnerability of knowledge, we must work through a more complex, deeper iteration of mystery. This is the plot of Lizzie and Eugene, a plot more closely connected with the analogical structure of the river than the dust heaps, and thus a plot which, like the river, flows beyond the society which encloses the mounds. In this case, we find that Mr Inspector is also excluded, though a far more profound mystery is at work.

3.5. The River, Providence and Violence.

The processes of urban mystery place a pressure on identity, but as the river transcends the urban scene, it is in the medium of the river that characters discover either their fullness or emptiness, should they come to the test. Thus, Gaffer Hexam is indeed "baptized unto death" (222) in the river, which is the medium both of potential life, for baptism is a rebirth, and of death and corruption: "the spoiling influences of water" (219). Gaffer, a dealer in death and corruption, is himself ultimately drawn into this economy, a system of exchange that is more than mere commerce. Yet it is at the moment that the mystery of Gaffer's death is uncovered, the moment when our pursuit of the Harmon murder is transformed into the story of the relationship between two other characters involved in that problem, that we are drawn into the plot of *Our Mutual Friend* which most fully explores the liminal, transforming, mysterious and providential powers of the river, a plot that deals with the elements of desire, violence, blackmail and murder, a suspense plot designated by anxiety and criminality.

As already observed, the chapters in which Gaffer Hexam is hunted down hold a kind of transformational power over *Our Mutual Friend.* At the moment when the

Harmon mystery commands our attention, Dickens undertakes to begin a second major strand of the story. Under the cover of one mystery, he initiates another. While Gaffer Hexam suffers death by drowning, his daughter waits for him. Lizzie Hexam's poignant vigil for her father is a symbolic enactment of their relationship: Lizzie is attached, both in life and death, to his memory and the life borne to her out of the river and his efforts. At the same time, Eugene Wrayburn watches her. His covert observation is both the magical discovery of a fairy tale or myth and an act of criminal violation. For both of them, their potentials are established here. We see Eugene, shortly before this, in danger of being bored "fatally" (194), still in the reifying world of the empty Veneerings where every human subject is reduced to nothing more than a label: "'Could I possibly go down there, labelled "ELIGIBLE. ON VIEW," and meet the lady, similarly labelled?" (194). The topic of marriage is not accidentally introduced, nor does Eugene draw a "lady's head upon his writing paper" (201) by chance; both show the subconscious tensions within Eugene. At this moment, marriage to the woman selected by M.R.F would be the final acquiescence to a kind of death. Eugene reacts against these possibilities, and we see that Lizzie Hexam is on his mind: ""You mentioned (twice, I think) a daughter of this Hexam's'" (203). Both characters are primed for their eventual testing. Both their potentials, and their inner conflicts, are anticpated by these acts.

In pursuit of one mystery, Eugene Wrayburn finds himself implicated in another. He is drawn into the mysteries of his own intentions and capabilities. Thus, pursuing one probable criminal, he feels himself transformed into a criminal: "'I have now committed a burglary under the meanest circumstances'" (212). Indeed, there is something unpleasant in the image of him spying on Lizzie: "'Next time (with a view to our peace of mind) we'll commit the crime, instead of taking the criminal'" (213). Later on, we see that Eugene's relationship with Lizzie is only possible as a kind of criminal violation, or an impossible marriage, at least according to the options that his friend, Mortimer Lightwood, enunciates:

'Eugene, do you design to capture and desert this girl?'

'My dear fellow, no.'
'Do you design to marry her?'
'My dear fellow, no.'
'Do you design to pursue her?'
"My dear fellow, I don't design anything.' (348)

His good impulses are in conflict with the guilty possibility of seduction and desertion, and so Eugene finds himself embroiled in the mystery of his intentions: the riddle that he cannot answer. His guilt implies some secret crime, already committed, while his lack of design, of any expressed purpose, is also a retreat from moral responsibility and from faith in providence. Until it is resolved, the mystery of Eugene's intentions will not be answered because not even he has enough self-knowledge to gauge them.

Bradley Headstone is an appropriate rival for Eugene, since he represents to Lizzie both the sanctioned form of her future and what Dickens describes as the inherent dangers and limits in acquiescence to this future. His plans to marry her in order to "raise her" and indirectly erase that stain of her father's shame are an accepted response to her position, and the same pressure of upward social mobility is exhibited through Lizzie, her brother and Headstone himself. But, as we have seen, these middle-class desires also distort, shaping the mind of Bradley Headstone to the warehouse mentality. Headstone is himself a shell; no mysterious filmy vacuum, exactly, like the Veneerings, but as a postulant middle class subject he does represent this possibility.

The surface of Bradley Headstone, however, conceals a violent interiority, and his bourgeois imperatives are susceptible to deeper human potentials: "But, even among school-buildings, school-teachers, and school-pupils, all according to pattern and all engendered in the light of the latest Gospel according to Monotony, the older pattern into which so many fortunes have been shaped for good and evil, comes out" (268). The "older pattern" of "good and evil" is a far more severe theme than that of the urban mysteries within which it is grounded. The Gospel of Monotony is one of de-individuation, but the "older pattern" that shapes "so many fortunes" is the pattern of providence. Thus, Dickens's plotting here prepares the way to place the submerged violence of Bradley Headstone within a providential structure.

The threat which is always present in Headstone, and often vented in overtly violent gestures, is not mysterious in the sense that we always fear, and to some extent expect, murderous actions from him: we are not in the grip of the kind of double-narrative that constructs the effects of a crime that has already been committed. But this fear of violence generates a constant suspense, an anxiety in the part of the reader about the future. The complex games of pursuit and counter-pursuit that Headstone engages in with Eugene Wrayburn are analogies to the rest of the action of *Our Mutual Friend*, concerned with covert observation (as Harmon watches the living, as Wegg spies on Boffin), pursuit, and reversal (as Eugene so often turns back on Headstone merely to discomfort him)[29]. Though we are linked to a new strand of the plot, we are still immersed in the mystery and uncertainty that propagates throughout *Our Mutual Friend.*

Both Eugene and Bradley, as they chase each other through the labyrinthine streets, are striving for knowledge and mastery of their opposite. As Eugene says, "With Venetian mystery I seek those No Thoroughfares at night, glide into them by means of dark courts, tempt the schoolmaster to follow, turn suddenly, and catch him before he can retreat" (606). The site of their struggle for superiority is the maze-like complex of the city of London itself. As Eugene uses its tricks of geography to annoy and perplex Bradley, he is striving for a mastery of the city that he can deploy like a weapon. The urban scene temporarily becomes the medium and the means of their conflict, a space that represents the secretive power struggle between them.

On Lizzie's part, then, the dangers in Headstone's proposal to her are obvious. The threat of marriage, with her brother's example before her, is equivalent to alienation and reification. Marriage would leave her a new identity with no relationship to her past or her skills. As Charley Hexam has it, "'What we have to do is, to turn our faces full in a new direction, and keep straight on'" (278), but this implies a dislocation of the past from the present and future. It requires, in fact, becoming pastless human

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[29]. An idea already developed in Jaffe 99-100, where this kind of reversal is connected with reversals in knowledge and power, as already mentioned.

beings, mere entities of the moment, like the Veneerings. Lizzie's response is telling: "'And never look back? Not even try to make some amends?'" (278). To detach oneself from ethical responsibility is also to be detached from providence. We might ask with what crimes is Lizzie charged, but her sense of guilt is metaphysical; in this sense, amends equate with an acceptance of responsibility for previous acts. A fully developed human being must maintain a dialogue between the past and future in order to maintain coherence as a person. The pride with which both Lizzie Hexam and Betty Higden are both charged is, in fact, their desire to keep their integrity, to be "of a piece like" (441).

Confronted by conditions both external and internal, the relationship between Eugene and Lizzie reaches a point of contradiction where neither further action, nor inaction, are possible. Both are faced by obstacles, psychological and exterior, that cannot be overcome. Their conundrum is complete; they are at an impasse determined by an unanswerable question. The riddle, for both of them, is reduced to utterly contradictory propositions, perhaps as contradictory as they are for Mr Inspector when he arrests a man for his own murder. As Eugene observes, it is "'Out of the question to marry her... out of the question to leave her. The crisis!'" (766). No internal choice is possible for them. They cannot change from within. At the limits of their knowledge, both of themselves and what can be done, we find that action is entirely circumvented. Only a form of intervention, a change in the balance between them, can possibly resolve their quandary. They have no power to make the world fit to their preferences, as John Harmon has such a power. They cannot assert a kind of mastery that will enable them to solve the mystery that confronts them: the enigma is insoluble.

The relationship between Lizzie and Eugene is not a closed system. For all his superiority over Bradley Headstone, Eugene is taken by surprise by his murderous attack. In the city, Eugene is able to turn back on Bradley and so take him unawares, but he does not anticipate that Bradley may, this time, catch him totally unprepared. The reversal is as stunning as that which Mr Boffin imposes on the reader and the plot. Initially, the assault is so unexpected that for Eugene it can only be compared to a

natural catastrophe: "Was he struck by lightening?" (767). If, for Bradley Headstone, his ambushing Eugene is the expression of necessity — he has no choice but to love Lizzie Hexam — in the wider schema of *Our Mutual Friend* it is also providential[30]. Headstone has no option in his obsessive love for Lizzie: "'I am under the influence of some tremendous attraction which I have resisted in vain, and which overmasters me'" (454). But the very circumstances of the most violent expression of this love, an expression already foreshadowed by Headstone's vow that "'you could draw me to the gallows, you could draw me to any death, you could draw me to anything I have most avoided, you could draw me to any exposure and disgrace'" (455), are providential, since it is at this moment that Lizzie is able to rescue Eugene and thus overcome her own psychic divide.

Her interior monologue as she rescues the battered and drowning man is not merely an expression of piety, since the providential design of *Our Mutual Friend* has foreseen this moment. It is not, therefore, out of place that Lizzie should think:

> Now, merciful Heaven be thanked for the old time, enabling me, without a wasted moment, to have got the boat afloat again and to row back against the stream! And grant, O Blessed Lord God, that through poor me he may be raised from death, and preserved to some one else to whom he may be dear, one day, though never dearer to me! (769)

Dickens's use of providence coincides with his understanding of the psychology of this act. By using her former skills, Lizzie is able to retrieve a living human being, not a dead body, from the river; thus, she is able to make amends. Her inheritance, her experience, is put to positive use, and so she is psychologically reconciled with her former self, but also able to look ahead. At the same time the circularity of this resolution, in a book which opened with a dead man being pulled from the same river, displays the operation of a kind of providential justice, a benevolent resolution of the relationship between past and future. Lizzie uses the same abilities, but the situation is transformed; scavenging off the dead gives way to rescuing the living. Reparation is made through the providential medium of the river.

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30. See Stone, *Night-side of Dickens* for a discussion of necessity — a necessity which is usually associated with obsessive relationships.

For Eugene Wrayburn, his immersion in the river is also providential. There is no need to belabour the pattern of death and resurrection in *Our Mutual Friend.* Often, the medium of death and return is the river. What is clear is that this death by drowning is a kind of test which divides the worthy from the unworthy. Or, more exactly, it enables a potential spiritual transformation. Old Harmon "'directs himself to be buried with certain eccentric ceremonies and precautions against his coming to life'" (58), perhaps because the life he has lived is unbearable to him. No amount of dunking will improve Rogue Riderhood — it is only the life within him, and not his personality, which has any value, but for both John Harmon and Eugene Wrayburn drowning is a kind of purification; they recover their essential, better selves, and return to life improved. The river is a liminal state; that is, it exists less as a context than a boundary, marking and enabling the transition between one state and another, one life and another. As Andrew Sanders observes: "To Dickens, the Thames seems like life itself, imbued with divine judgement, probing the virtuous and drowning the vicious. It reflects the mysterious workings of Providence" (187). It is not so much that Eugene's superficiality is beaten out of him, than that the testing medium of the river uncovers his better self. Mysterious and providential, it discovers either the depth or the emptiness of the subject.

Yet this providential movement is not contrary to the process of secularisation I outlined earlier. There is a deep ambiguity in resolving a plot of passion and violence through the providential medium of the river. That the solution to the quandary between Lizzie and Eugene is a murderous assault indicates the degree to which crime has in some sense co-opted the providential structure of divine justice. The crucial assault, Eugene's near death by drowning, only briefly clarifies the pattern of divine intention, and the message is yet unclear as Eugene pauses, uncertain as to whether to choose life or death: "'I have been thinking whether it is not the best thing I can do, to die'" (824). No earlier Dickens character, poised between life or the rewards of death, would have hesitated. That there is a providential design at work here cannot be denied, but that

design is mysterious, and it is executed through a crime plot, engaging simultaneously with the issues of providence, psychology and violence.

As such, providential resolutions are evident in the fate of assailant as well as victim. In many senses, Bradley Headstone prefigures John Jasper, and his future is similarly determined by the working out of a providential plot that he throws himself against and yet is helpless to alter. Bradley, a slave to his passions, is in some ways an inept plotter, whereas Jasper is more assured. Despite his close surveillance, and his interviews with Eugene, in each case Bradley finds his methodical approach thrown back in his face. Uninventive under pressure, unless he loses all self control, he prepares his speeches before his encounters with Lizzie, and yet finds himself unable to express his thoughts clearly: "'I have come this evening to explain it. I hope you will not judge me by my hesitating manner when I speak to you. You see me at my greatest disadvantage'" (452). He spies on and tracks Eugene in a sad attempt to regain control of the events that surround him; violence is ultimately the only response which may satisfy him. Like John Jasper, however, Bradley Headstone chooses a surrogate for his violent impulses, dressing like Rogue Riderhood initially to facilitate his spying, and later in order to frame him for the crime of murder. Riderhood, though of lower social standing than Headstone, is nevertheless, an experienced rogue and informer. Bradley's clumsy attempts to outwit him are easily turned and detected. In effect, every step in his plan — the use of Riderhood as a scapegoat, the attack on Eugene — rebounds on Bradley, enabling the very series of events that he most fears. Providence uses Bradley Headstone and then destroys him, simultaneously destroying the novel's other main villain, Rogue Riderhood. Eventually, like all other characters, he seeks immersion in the river, but the Lock, the point where the river is enclosed and stagnant, like Bradley Headstone's own frustrated desires, is for Bradley a place of cold immersion, vengeance and death. Both Bradley and Rogue Riderhood drown here, enabling the providential structure to deal justice to both villains. Riderhood, who for once might find himself able to inform on a real murderer, tries blackmail instead, and is drowned permanently by his last potential victim.

It is in this providential conclusion to this particular plot that we find the second absence of Mr Inspector. Here is another reversal that echoes Mr Inspector's failure to solve the Harmon case, where the suspect turns out to be the assumed victim. Headstone's murderous assault is clearly a police matter, but Eugene refuses to allow the police to take any part. This absence further links the resolution of these two plots. Where the Harmon murder was ultimately discharged of its anxieties, no residual mystery remained, except for the disturbing potentiality (only a potentiality) of unexpected reversal, such as that confronted by Mr Inspector. The potential of that reversal, the limits of knowledge, reappears in the violent resolution of the Lizzie and Eugene plot. Yet despite the providential structure, this conclusion is believable, partly because it does not draw upon the romance contrivances of the Boffin deception. Its lineaments are still the lineaments of a suspense and mystery plot. In this sense, secular crime intrudes on and displaces the providential movement, but there is also a reason to see a greater resistance of mystery in the end of the story of Lizzie and Eugene. This is not only because providence itself is always mysterious, judging and dispensing justice in ways that the human subject can only dimly comprehend, but because the providential test of the river is inevitably a test of the inner being, the true personality, the self which none of us can entirely know before we ourselves are put to the test. John Harmon tests externals, and succeeds in that test. Eugene Wrayburn confronts the inward self, and even in his survival there is yet a residue of doubt that none of us can evade: "'there is a sharp misgiving that if I were to live I should disappoint your good opinion and my own'" (825). This secret distress is one part of Eugene's decision not to pursue Bradley Headstone through the law. The exclusion of Mr Inspector, and the providential justice achieved, points to the limitations of human knowledge and the greater movements of divine justice.

In its enactment of the providential structure and the darker overtones of the "Older pattern.. [of] good and evil" (268) the Lizzie and Eugene plot overtakes the Harmon murder. Whereas Wegg finds his bathetic punishment in a dung-barrow, finally reduced to a goblin of comic evil, Bradley Headstone and Rogue Riderhood,

more powerful enactments of evil and passion, meet a grimmer fate. Thus, the Lizzie and Eugene plot ultimately deals with the darker and more profound themes of the novel. This aspect of the multiple mysteries of *Our Mutual Friend*, then, found itself expressed again in the mystery of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood,* in Dickens's concentration on the mind of John Jasper, who is prefigured, in actions and in fate, by Bradley Headstone. *Our Mutual Friend* is curiously suspended between these two modes of mystery, between urban mystery and intense psychological mystery, in its contrast between the Harmon murder and the Lizzie and Eugene plot. Dickens's abandonment of the Harmon murder, perhaps through a kind of dissatisfaction with the possibilities of the urban form, and his presentation of the Headstone attempted murder, may suggest an important change in the direction of his thinking, leaving a novel held between the old multiple mysteries tradition and the possibility of a singular murder mystery. But the Lizzie and Eugene plot, as a detection plot, is only partly formed and ejects the detective, Mr Inspector, suggesting the possibilities of a new form and direction but not fully exploring them. Fittingly, then, the last words of *Our Mutual Friend* are given over to Eugene and Lizzie rather than the Harmons, if indirectly. Lightwood seeks the voice of society, some conclusive statement on events. But as we have seen, society, though mysterious, is also vacuous, meaningless and fragile, and the Veneerings will leave this world, "Having found out the clue to that great mystery how people can contrive to live beyond their means" (886). Their disappearance from society, as mysterious as their appearance, is at one with an urban mystery which may not be worth knowing. Characters must take control of mystery, or submit to the greater will of providence. What is clear is that the mysteries of society, and its sanctions, are false and distorting mysteries. Lightwood, searching for the voice of society, finds its judgements facetious. Only Twemlow, "true gentleman," who has held steadfastly to moral truth throughout the novel, perceives the facts as they are, in opposition to all other voices: "'if such feelings on the part of this gentleman, induced this gentleman to marry this lady, I think he is the greater gentleman for the action, and makes her the greater lady" (891). Society persists, and so to do its

mysteries, but these mysteries are in turn bounded by greater mysteries, and it is in this medium that we also find the possibility of truth, identity, the power to rewrite the self. Twemlow's judgement is the right one, and Lightwood has good reason to be satisfied when he "fares to the Temple, gaily" (892).

3.6. Conclusions: The Other Purpose of *Our Mutual Friend.*

In his postscript to *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens argued that he had anticipated that many readers would perceive the secret of a mystery that he was at "great pains to suggest" (893): that John Rokesmith was, in fact, John Harmon. As usual, Dickens showed his preference for suggestion, believing that the interest inherent in the situation would outweigh the disappointment of premature knowledge. The Harmon mystery, as we have seen, was already partly a revealed mystery. But under the cover of the Harmon mystery, Dickens intended to pursue another purpose: "To keep for a long time unsuspected, yet always working itself out, another purpose originating in that leading incident, and turning it to a pleasant and useful account" (893). We might imagine, here, the same principle of narrative propagation: subsidiary mysteries and concerns rising and replicating out of the leading incident. If that other purpose was the testing of Bella, we can see how that even more concealed mystery in a sense defeated the reader, if not the author, and thereby outlined, to some degree, the limits of our knowledge. This is no more than we can expect in a world of reification, an urban universe in which all clues are false, all identities merely disguises. It is another form of engagement with mystery to try and read that labyrinth of relationships as the author does, to "perceive the relations of its finer threads to the whole pattern" (893). That is, we might also look from the structure of the plot to the structure of analogy, to see how the causal links that are finely dispersed through the former may be recovered as analogical similarities in the latter. We see also how the line of plot, composed of multiple strands, can be both dispersed and express a curious coherency. But *Our Mutual Friend* may have "another purpose" of which not even Dickens was fully

aware, for if the leading incident of *Our Mutual Friend* is also the work of Lizzie Hexam and her father on the river, then the other purpose may, in fact, be the mystery and suspense that springs up, from under the cover of the Harmon tale, into her story. Thus, as the Harmon plot loses momentum, we find ourselves turning away from the false mysteries of the urban world into a greater mystery of providence. In this movement from urban mystery to a new mystery of psychology, potentiality and murder, we might trace the germ of the transformation from Dickens's last extended urban novel to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood.* Nevertheless, *Our Mutual Friend* still demonstrates its unity in the liminal, testing qualities of the river itself. It is not necessary to be Mr Inspector to confront that test, but it is only if we continue to search for true values in a falsifying world that we have any chance of emerging from our immersion in the medium of life and death itself, not unscathed, but transformed for the better.

4. Mastering the Clues in Pip's 'Poor Labyrinth.'

After all, the fundamental question of philosophy (like that of psychoanalysis) is the same as the question of the detective novel: who is guilty?

— Umberto Eco, *Reflections on The Name of the Rose.*

4.1. A Tale of Mystery and Adventure.

Dickens began the serial *Great Expectations* in *All the Year Round* in order to boost sales at a time when the running story appeared to be losing readers due to the aimlessness of its plot[31]. Dickens made the decision to "strike in" (qtd. in Hornback 12) with *Great Expectations* in order to regain, we might assume, that elusive relationship with his readership that he often referred to as "interest." Responding to Dickens's efforts to capture the attention of his readership, the *Athenaeum* review of *Great Expectations* (13 July, 1861: 43-45) praised the novel as "a tale of mystery and adventure," adding that it contained "such variety of humour, such deep and tender knowledge of the secrets of a yearning heart, as belong to a novel of the highest order" (44). Since then *Great Expectations* has been generally highly regarded for the attention shown by Dickens to plot and structure, yet the mystery aspect of the novel has often been elided or undervalued. This may stem from a suspicion of the Sensation fiction elements of *Great Expectations*, the association of suspense and crime with mere entertainment. If the *Athenaeum* reviewer saw no contradiction between *Great Expectations* being "a tale of mystery and adventure" and "a novel of the highest order," modern criticism has tended to be suspicious of plot, or, though it acknowledges those elements of mystery and adventure in *Great Expectations*, it has tended to treat these as somehow outside of the main thrust of analytical reading[32].

From *Edwin Drood* and *Our Mutual Friend* I have tried to read Dickens with the mystery not as an addendum but as a point of focus, as organic to an understanding of

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31. See the publishing history of *Great Expectations* in Hornback 12-13 or Sadrin, *Great Expectations* 3-17.

32. See the comments on *Great Expectations* of Hornback and Sadrin, in section 1.2.

Dickens's narrative art. Where, then, is it appropriate to begin tracing the mystery in *Great Expectations*? A few key words, and the advice of the narrator, Pip himself, supply us with a starting point. At the beginning of chapter 29, Pip fantasises about the restoration of Satis House, with himself as knightly hero, and his dreams make up "a rich attractive mystery" (253). Pip adds:

> Estella was the inspiration of it, and the heart of it, of course. But, though she had taken such a strong possession of me, though my fancy and my hopes were so set upon her, though her influence on my boyish life and character had been all-powerful, I did not, even that romantic morning, invest her with any attributes save those she possessed. I mention this in this place, of a fixed purpose, because it is the clue by which I am to be followed into my poor labyrinth. (253)

Even with such a clue from such a self-conscious and self-searching narrator, it would be naive to believe that the master-key to a definitive reading of *Great Expectations* were now at hand. It is, however, a route into Pip's "poor labyrinth." The word clue is another form of the clew that shows the way through a maze. Estella is such a thread that binds the skein of submerged identities and connections which shape *Great Expectations* and Pip's fate. Where in *Our Mutual Friend* we find the threads of the multi-plot narrative dispersing and propagating, in *Great Expectations* these threads are knitted together into a textured whole that describes the nature of a submerged order. In making this discovery, Pip uncovers part of a second narrative that is similar to the suppressed narrative in a double-narrative such as that which informs *The Mystery of Edwin Drood.* The submerged order is a guilty order, determined by criminality and complicity. It is in pursuing the story of Estella's connection to this order that Pip regains, in part, a knowledge of himself, mastering the clues to ultimately confront such knowing initiates as Mr Jaggers. For Pip, this becomes also knowledge of who is blameworthy, and thus who is guilty. These discoveries implicate the hero in the world of secrecy and urban mystery, but Pip merely invites the reader to follow him into his labyrinth; his text must show if there is eventually a way out.

4.2. Estella: Knitting the Threads of Narrative.

In the same passage in which Pip presents Estella as the clue to his labyrinth, he problematises his relationship with her. Pip, ever the most scrupulous and self-conscious self-analyser, tells us that though he did not

> invest her with any attributes save those she possessed... the unqualified truth is, that when I loved Estella with the love of a man, I loved her simply because I found her irresistible. Once for all; I knew to my sorrow, often and often, if not always, that I loved her against reason, against promise, against peace, against hope, against happiness, against all discouragement that could be. Once for all; I loved her none the less because I knew it, and it had no more influence in restraining me, than if I had devoutly believed her to be human perfection. (253-4)

As Pip makes clear, he knows what Estella's nature is, and yet he persists in his love for her. He wants his reader to have no illusion about this, and dismiss the possibility of a romantic illusion attaching to Estella in his (Pip's) own eyes, and yet his self-deluding love for Estella continues. The reader must interrogate this pointed contradiction. In the first place, Estella is the focus of Pip's great expectations. Seen clearly in her own self by Pip, she is yet inextricably attached to his fantasy of the fairy-tale renewal of Satis House:

> [Miss Havisham] had adopted Estella, she had as good as adopted me.... She reserved it for me to restore the desolate house, admit the sunshine into the dark rooms, set the clocks a going and the cold hearths a blazing, tear down the cobwebs, destroy the vermin — in short, do all the deeds of the young Knight of romance, and marry the Princess. (253)

Estella is, whatever her status in Pip's thoughts, the "inspiration" of this romantic dream (253). Furthermore, it is Estella who first makes Pip aware of his own shortcomings, an awareness that mutates under emotional pressure into Pip's aspirations. Her outburst at their first meeting is a devastating critique of his language, his appearances and his possessions: "'He calls the knaves, Jacks, this boy! And what coarse hands he has! And what thick boots!'" (90). Thereafter, Pip can only hope that he was "more genteelly brought up" (92). His final humiliation, to have food brought to him in the yard by Estella "as if I were a dog in disgrace" (92), brings tears to his eyes, and a sense of shame and discontent that the child cannot quite identify, a "smart

without a name" (92). Whatever the pain, Estella sees it and is complicit with it, inciting the outwards signs of Pip's frustrated sense of inadequacy and yearning: "'Why don't you cry?'" (93). If Pip has no illusions about Estella, he nevertheless builds an illusion around her. She is both the source of Pip's deep shame towards his origins and the emblem of his aspirations.

For most of *Great Expectations* Pip knows what Estella is but not who she is. She dominates Pip's expectations, yet as if she had been made entirely by Miss Havisham, she has no origins, or identity, of her own. As Pip unravels the mystery, Estella is shown to be the linking term in a complex network of relationships: she is Abel Magwitch's daughter, and this natural relationship thus permits her to mediate almost all the other relationships within the novel. When Pip visits her and Miss Havisham to plead with Estella not to marry Bentley Drummle, he finds Estella knitting with Miss Havisham looking on. This curiously domestic act is reiterated throughout the chapter (372-379), and Pip is constantly drawn to the "action of Estella's fingers as they worked" (373). It is in the later part of the novel, when Pip begins to piece together the hidden connections of the past, that this scene occurs. Estella's knitting, like Pip's investigations, are a means of drawing together, of linking the threads into a textured whole. At the same time Estella's fingers moving at their work are another clue which enables another connection to be made, for they join her hands to the hands of her mother, and in a moment of almost hallucinatory association Pip sees the whole of their connection in an insight that "flashed about me like lightning" (403). Drawing memories, resemblances and relationship together in the thread of her knitting, Estella links — Pip finds the link "riveted for me now" (403) — the plots and persons of the text, drawing into association Magwitch, Miss Havisham and Mr Jaggers, as well as the levels of the plot[33]. As Peter Brook points out, "Estella's story in fact eventually links all the plots of the novel: Satis House, the aspiration to gentility, the convict

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[33]. I am not arguing that knitting is a new *central* metaphor for the text, but using the image, particularly striking in this scene, to help explicate my argument. Nevertheless, I think that knitting, which brings together the hands and looped links of thread, could well be another part of the well-commented on complex of hands-chains-links imagery that runs throughout *Great Expectations*. See Hornback 83-105.

identity, 'naterally wicious' (the status from which Jaggers rescued her), bringing up by hand, the law" (134). Miss Havisham's adopted child is the daughter of the convict, Magwitch and his acquitted murderess wife. Her life links this array of characters and the themes they hold in common, drawing together the lawful and the unlawful, the genteel and the lower-class. Her knitting functions figuratively as a kind of knotting together of textual energies, an enactment of a plot process which is nevertheless covert and retrospective, as the binding together of the threads of plot creates a continuity that is always present in the text, though it is often unknown and unseen until the end of the novel, when all of the connections are apparent[34].

When Pip makes the link between the hands of mother and daughter, we have an exemplary moment of discovery in the mystery text, as much so as the scene in which the returned Magwitch confronts his protégé. Throughout *Great Expectations* there have been two stories and two contesting plots. On the one hand, there is Magwitch's plot, a story of communion with the criminal and the guilty past, even the guilt of a small child whose very survival is pointed out to him as a moral outrage. On the other hand, there is Miss Havisham's plot, the dream of gentility and aspiration, which is itself haunted by a nightmare past[35]. Each plot eerily doubles the other: the background to Pip's Satis House inspired expectations is Magwitch's money; Magwitch's criminal history and his daughter become bound in the past of Satis House. Dickens's great innovation was to make the good and desirable plot (as Pip imagines Miss Havisham's plan to be) turn out to be criminal and manipulative, while the plot of Magwitch's crime was (to some degree) an act of charity.

These plots exist, one covert and the other overt, until a certain moment, or moments, of revelation, and thus suggest in outline the two narratives of the double-narrative of the mystery plot. After a fashion, the Magwitch plot and the Havisham plot are reflective functions of the two narratives of the double-narrative, the mystery and

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34. The *Athenaeum* review also praises Dickens's plot for having no "dropped stitches" (44).
35. For diagrams of the various plots of *Great Expectations* see Brooks 117 or Sadrin, *Great Expectations* 154-155. The attribution of the plots changes from critic to critic, but there is a persistent binarism between the gentility of Miss Havisham's world and the submerged criminality of the Magwitch world.

the solution that we might have seen in *Edwin Drood* had it been completed[36]. On the one side is the Magwitch plot. There is a mystery, the question of the source of Pip's inheritance, and this mystery is connected to a kind of criminality. The Magwitch plot is, therefore, the true fable, resembling Todorov's *fabula*, things-as-they-are, but its essential nature is that it is initially concealed from the reader. On the other side, there is the story of an investigation, the results of the initial mystery, the *sjuzet*, the text as presented to us, but in this case Pip initially assumes that he has solved the mystery, that he knows Miss Havisham to be his benefactor. Therefore, Miss Havisham's plot resembles the narrative of the red-herring, the plot of falsification, misplaced suspicion and uncertainty that persists until the true narrative can be uncovered. What is characteristic of the double-narrative is that these plots exist, one overt and one covert, until a moment of revelation. Confronted by Magwitch, or by the wrists and fingers of Jaggers's housekeeper, Pip is thrown back into the past, back into a process of re-evaluation in which he attempts to discern the true pattern of events and his own actions. In each case the Havisham plot is overthrown and the Magwitch plot, which reveals the true crime, emerges in greater and greater detail.

For the first stage of his expectations, then, Pip is self-deluding, actively bending the facts to fit his theory, so much so that he can transform the witch Miss Havisham into fairy god-mother and matchmaker as she makes "her crutch stick play round me, as if she, the fairy godmother who had changed me, were bestowing the finishing gift" (183). Pip transfers the "rich attractive mystery" of Satis House into the realms of romance, thus displacing, or forgetting, the Gothic aspect of mystery. Ignoring the dust, death and decay of her house and the inevitable taint of secrecy and betrayal, Pip fails to accurately read within the right genre. Pip sees himself temporarily as a *bildungsroman* hero, unaware of his immersion in a Sensation mystery. Miss Havisham's manipulation of Pip's misapprehension is cruel and self-centred, but as she later correctly accuses him in the face of his recriminations, "'You

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[36]. I say reflective functions only, not that these two plots are *sjuzet* and *fabula*, since ultimately the whole of the text — both plots included — could be subject to this distinction.

made your own snares. *I* never made them" (374). The other narrative, the true fact of his expectations, is suppressed by Pip, but it does not disappear. Instead, it emerges in events and reminders: a convict stirs his drink with a file, on a stagecoach convicts converse about two one pound notes. Pip misreads these clues, pushing them out of his awareness and maintaining his connection to a false narrative, the narrative of his striving after gentility. Up to the moment of peripety in chapter 39, Pip manipulates his own narrative, misreading one mystery as romance, while failing to react to the persistent recurrence of the mystery of criminality which is nevertheless the true, motivating source of his life. It is only after his second encounter with Magwitch that he begins to read the clues faithfully.

Interposed between the young, persistently mistaken Pip and the reader is the mature narrator. His act of autobiography is a sustained re-examination of his life and its errors, yet he engages in a narrative stratagem of mystery, concealing from the reader the one transforming fact that he knows best of all. Of course, the memory of Pip's childhood encounter with Magwitch is not thrust away in the same way for the reader as it is for Pip. We expect some return of this aspect of the past and read Pip's encounters with convicts even more attentively than he does. Yet since these ironies are most strongly felt in rereading — "*Great Expectations* is a novel that of necessity reads backwards as much as forwards" (Sadrin 51) — we are nevertheless drawn into a mystery. If we suspect what Pip cannot allow himself to suspect, this is not strictly knowledge but merely a forewarning. So Anny Sadrin argues that "Our surprise is assuredly nothing compared to Pip's astonishment on discovering the identity of his benefactor, but our forebodings were not knowledge properly speaking: when the moment of revelation comes, we know just as much and just as little as the hero does" (149). We know, Sadrin continues, as much as Pip knows. Furthermore, the *Athenaeum* (44) noted that when the catastrophe came, it was so powerful that it was as if it had been unforeseen. As readers, we interpret differently, but we are still subjected to the mystery narrative of the mature Pip. When the revelation comes, we, like Pip,

must read backwards and reinterpret the clues and resemblances that have surrounded us, only partly understood, up to this point.

4.3. The Skein of Clues.

Pip's narrative must be read and re-read: within the first narrative lurks a second, covert narrative that must be retrospectively investigated and uncovered. Throughout the telling of Pip's story this surges into prominence, making itself suspected through a skein of clues and resemblances. These are the associations that the double-narrative makes most apparent; those that assume prominence in the retrospective reading and rereading that solves the mystery. These clues are, indeed, threads in Pip's labyrinth, a system of analogues and connections whose true nature is always present, but which must be recovered backwards through the text. Like the analogical structures of *Our Mutual Friend*, the skein of clues can double with and connect to the plot. What happens in *Great Expectations* is that the analogical structure serves less to define a world of urban mystery, as it does in *Our Mutual Friend*, than to elaborate the nature of the mysteries in which Pip finds himself, and subtly points to the totality of those realities Pip has suppressed, ignored, or been ignorant of. Some characters, like Herbert Pocket, help secure these linkages through interposed narratives of their own. Herbert tells Pip the remarkable story of Miss Havisham's betrayal, or closes another gap with the note inserted into the text: "'Young Havisham's name was Arthur. Compeyson is the man who professed to be Miss Havisham's lover'" (367). The narrative itself also contains these clues. As David Shaw points out (36-7), the reader, and Pip, often know more than they know that they know. Phrases and situations that are subtly repeated in Pip's life are thereby "collapsed in a discovery of the concealed origins and ends that matter most" (34), leading to a recognition of the knowledge that we had only previously intuited through the text's structure of parallelisms and relationships. This skein of clues is enacted through various modes: firstly through plot action and repetition, as events continually echo earlier states and

situations; secondly through what may be termed the visual or symbolic intuitions of a character like Pip, whose noticing of hands and faces leads into a linkage of persons; and finally, and most subtly, a system of submerged connections which often seem almost trivial or oblique but reinforce the more robust structures mentioned above.

The plot exhibits a circular process most obviously in the scene of Magwitch's return, which links it with the first scenes in the novel. The moment when the young Pip became aware of "the identity of things" (35) becomes, with the convict's return, the moment when Pip learns the true identity of his benefactor, and this revelation, to employ the terms of Pip's fable of the chain and the block in the Eastern story, is a moment of collapse, compounding the two times both symbolically and causally. "So," writes Pip, "in my case; all the work near and afar, that tended to the end, had been accomplished; and in an instant the blow was struck, and the roof of my stronghold dropped upon me" (330). Everything that links the past to Pip is unknown to Pip. The moment the rope is severed and causes the block to fall is the moment when the connection is most obvious, because the causal chain is indisputable, and most disastrous. This image of collapse echoes the peripety of other mystery plots: the fall of the House of Clennam, the death of Tulkinghorn and Lady Dedlock's flight, but the story of the chain emphasises also the circularity of these events. *Great Expectations*, as Hornback points out, is structured by a series of returns, a kind of circular shuttling, for Pip, between London and the village which contains his home and Satis House (94-105). At every point in Pip's life reminders of that first moment of self identity force themselves on him — in a gift of notes from a convict, in a file, in a pair of leg-irons, in a conversation on a coach, in a visit to Newgate prison. Pip may indeed complain of "this taint of prison and crime... starting out like a stain that was faded but not yet gone" (284). Continually people —like Orlick, Bentley Drummle or Mr Wopsle — and objects — files, banknotes, leg-irons — occur and recur to him, as though coincidence were aping the structures and doubling of an obsessive memory. Yet Pip also intuits identities between objects that he does not know are linked.

The most powerful association of this kind is the resemblance between Estella's hands and the scarred wrists of Jaggers's housekeeper. For Pip, Estella's face and hands in a carriage window bring on a "nameless shadow which again in the one instant had passed" (284). The shadow has no name since Pip refuses to grant it identity, still thinking with an "absolute abhorrence of the contrast between the jail and [Estella]" (284), yet he intuits and records the intuition of its existence. Other such subliminal associations haunt Pip's narrative. In Jaggers's office, shortly after his birthday, Pip expects to learn the identity of his benefactor from the lawyer: "As I sat down, he preserved his attitude and bent his brows at his boots. I felt at a disadvantage, which reminded me of the old time I had been put upon a tombstone" (303). Of course, it is Magwitch, operating through Jaggers, who is Pip's benefactor, the man who first propped the child on a tombstone in the opening of the novel (Sucksmith 61). Pip's discomfiture, then, is the suppressed trace of a suspicion, like the link he suspects between Estella and her true parentage, that Pip will not admit to himself. Nevertheless, Pip exactly recalls these associations, just as he recalls the circular reappearances of persons, objects and events.

At the deepest level of the text, and perhaps of memory, are connections that not even Pip can be expected to be aware of. These belong to the most submerged clues within the novel's skein of linkages. A complex textual echo such as this can be seen early in the novel. When Pip first reports to Satis House, he has this exchange with Miss Havisham:

> 'Do you know what I touch here?' she said, laying her hands, one upon the other, on her left side.
> 'Yes, ma'am.' (It made me think of the young man.)
> 'What do I touch?'
> 'Your heart.'
> 'Broken!' (88)

That telling parenthetical note — "(It made me think of the young man.)" — contains a host of associations of which not even Pip, and certainly not the child Pip, can be aware. Miss Havisham's melodramatic gesture reminds Pip of the fearsome and cannibalistic young man in Magwitch's tale, told to him on the marshes as a means of

frightening Pip and securing his compliance. This devouring intruder links the two scenes, and it may be that Pip's reaction to this gesture shows that unconsciously he associates Miss Havisham with the young man, as though she were an ogress, a Baba Yaga rather than a fairy godmother (and, in fact, Miss Havisham does "eat" at least two children, using up their lives in her own revenge). But the young man Pip is reminded of, initially the fiction that Magwitch uses to intimidate the small boy, is also a real man: the haggard convict encountered by Pip as he goes out to his rendezvous with Magwitch. Pip naturally believes that the cannibal of the story he has been told is the other convict, but in fact this is Compeyson, Magwitch's former master. What neither Pip nor Magwitch can know is that it is also Compeyson who posed as Miss Havisham's lover, he who figuratively destroyed and devoured her heart. Thus, Pip's fleeting parenthetical identification is entirely correct, linking a complex causal and semiotic chain to the figure of Compeyson, who in turn links the narratives of Magwitch and Miss Havisham, and thus the narratives of Pip's great expectations.

These connections are deeply submerged, barely conscious, visible only in retrospect, but they point towards the order of Pip's narrative world, an order which is always present but not always apprehended. Thus, Pip's world is a mysterious skein of clues, each gesture or sign concealing and containing a resemblance or connection to a criminal Other. These clues, enacted on various levels, from conscious repetition to visual intuitions and submerged congruencies, all point to the true order of the narrative, the originating narrative always in the process of discovery through an often false investigatory narrative, a narrative which has at its base a consistent sense of guilt and the search for the guilty. The mystery that Pip begins to solve is that of who is responsible for his patrimony. As he explores this simple mechanical problem it becomes more complex, the mystery of who is guilty. This mystery is really metaphysical. Pip is not searching for the solution to a crime, at least in a legal sense, but he is haunted by a sense of guilt, and a feeling of responsibility towards the guilt of others. This question of meaningful guilt is a question of mystery and detection, in the sense which Umberto Eco outlines in his *Reflections on The Name of the Rose*: "the

fundamental question of philosophy (like that of psychoanalysis) is the same as the question of the detective novel: who is guilty?" (54). *Great Expectations* poses this question through the social connections it makes between various levels of society. What the skein of clues slowly uncovers is the complexity of these interrelations, not a singularity of guilt but, metaphysically, a guilty order.

4.4. The Guilty Order.

From his childhood, from the first sequence of narrated time in which Pip forms his sense of self-identity, the hero of *Great Expectations* is haunted by his obscure awareness of guilt, of complicity in a criminal order. Yet apart from the petty pilfering of a child under imagined duress, there is very little that Pip does which is legally wrong, though he feels personally implicated in every crime up to attempted murder (the assault on Mrs Joe). As Moynahan notes in his essay on the "hero's guilt," snobbery is not a crime (60), yet Moynahan goes on to argue that Pip's relationship with Orlick, in which Orlick acts out Pip's own fantasies of revenge, makes concrete a symbolic or metaphysical guilt. Van Ghent, in positing even a broader atmosphere of crime, argues that "[Pip's] 'great expectations' have already begun to make him a collaborator in the generic crime of using people as means to personal ends" (131), adding that this is a consequence of the injustices of the capitalist structure of Victorian society. Now, Pip's initial sense of guilt is very much his own. He is treated by his sister/foster mother as if, "I was a young offender whom an Accoucheur Policeman had taken up (on my birthday) and delivered over to her, to be dealt with according to the outraged majesty of the law. I was always treated as if I had insisted on being born, in opposition to the dictates of reason, religion, and morality" (54). It may even be that Pip, the only remaining member, besides a much older sister, of his family, feels that emotion known as survivor guilt. That is, he is guilty simply because he persists in living where many others have died. Yet the moment he first becomes aware of himself as a survivor is also the moment of his first encounter with

Magwitch, the spectre of criminal guilt, who drives Pip into acts of evasion and theft. Pip tells us that he was a sensitive child (92), and the guilt of a child, even carried into adulthood, is entirely subjective. Its scope is small, but it contains the entire perspective of the child, and even in maturity that perspective remains all-inclusive. While Pip's childhood crimes are petty, their ramifications are emotionally immense, and Dickens is particularly acute in describing these feelings: "Conscience is a dreadful thing when it accuses man or boy; but when, in the case of a boy, that secret burden co-operates with another secret burden down the legs of his trousers, it is (as I can testify) a great punishment" (44). Pip's discomfort is amusing, but it is not psychologically exaggerated. The novel continues, however, in developing the universality of guilt as Pip develops. Though the initial burden of guilt is his psychologically, guilt develops for Pip into a metaphysical, universal and social matter.

We have already observed how clues, signs and reminders of the submerged order, the nature of events initiated by Pip's encounter with Magwitch on the marshes, continually force themselves onto our attention. Pip's gentility, then, the false Satis House narrative he imposes over his expectations, is already compromised by his relationship to criminality. Anny Sadrin outlines the dialectic between the terms convict and gentleman in the novel, noting that even when Pip first encounters Herbert Pocket (whom he knows then only as the "pale young gentleman" (118)), it is Herbert who initiates their fight according to the "'Laws of the game'" (119), but it is Pip, innocent and unaggressive, who is made to feel like the wrong-doer, "a species of savage young wolf" (121)[37]. The gentleman makes the rules and induces the fight that makes a savage of young Pip. The most obvious form of this dialectic relationship is the central structural principle of the novel: Magwitch's decision to make a gentleman through his patronage of Pip. Pip's great expectations and his gentility are founded on criminality; in a material and a cultural sense they depend on criminality. In its darkest aspect, in a society where the status of gentleman is signalled by material possessions, Magwitch

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[37]. See Sadrin, "'Convict' versus 'gentleman'" in her work on *Great Expectations* (47-59).

seeks not to overthrow that structure but contain it by taking it to its logical extreme of owning a gentleman proper: "'If I ain't a gentleman, nor yet ain't got no learning, I'm the owner of such. All on you owns stocks and lands; which on you owns a brought-up London gentleman?'" (339). We might revert to Foucault to observe that prison discipline seems to internalise itself within Magwitch, who in turn enforces these ideals on his chosen successor[38]. Once again, the convict's desires are determined by the rules of the gentlemen. However, as Hornback points out (72), what constitutes a gentleman for Magwitch is largely defined by the only "gentleman" he has properly known, that is, Compeyson. These qualities are learning, smooth talk, smart clothes and conspicuous wealth. The reader, throughout this discussion, may know that the qualities of a true Dickensian gentleman are otherwise, but the qualities that Compeyson possesses, and Magwitch thus seeks to instil in his gentleman, are the qualities against which Dickens's critique is directed. They are, in fact, the qualities which divide Magwitch from Compeyson in the judgement of society: "'My lords and gentleman, here you has before you, side by side, two persons as your eyes can separate wide; one, the younger, well brought up, who will be spoke to as such; one, the elder, ill brought up, who will be spoke to as such" (365). Language and appearance make a gentleman before the court, not inward qualities. Behind convict and gentleman, then, lurks the figure of Compeyson, linking them both in a dialectical relationship.

Compeyson, convict and gentleman, is, like Estella, another linking figure who bridges the divide between Satis House and the hulks. He is the centre of the novel's processes of guilt and harm: Magwitch's model gentleman, Miss Havisham's swindler, a principle of evil whose guilt encompasses all the lesser guilts of the novel. Both Magwitch's and Miss Havisham's revenge schemes originate with him. Yet as the foundation of the novel's guilty order he is curiously absent, rarely glimpsed, only ever partially detailed, hardly felt even as a character. We tend to see Compeyson as an effect, such as the shock and alarm seen in Wopsle's face as he himself looks on

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38. This is an obvious point with which to begin a Foucauldian reading that cannot be pursued here. For such a reading, see Tambling.

Compeyson while Pip observes him on the stage (397). Of course, as the adventure plot intensifies, as Compeyson and his associates move in on Magwitch while Pip struggles to get him out of the country, we feel a steady intensification of fear and alarm. But, there is an absence at the centre of *Great Expectations*, and this absence has a diffusing effect. Guilt cannot collect around Compeyson because he is too shadowy to bear it. Instead, guilt moves outwards into the narrative world again, subtly infecting all those characters who intersect with Compeyson or his victims along the narrative chain. Compeyson is necessarily vague because guilt is vague. By connecting scattered characters and concepts, he disperses the guilt that he appears to embody.

There is a sense in which Pip, through the narrative, discovers Compeyson as much as he learns the truth about Estella. But at the close of the novel, Pip expends his energies trying to evade Compeyson and his revenge as much as he pursues Estella's heritage. He must detach himself from this type of the gentleman, the type of gentleman that Magwitch has inadvertently made him — a gentleman of diamond rings, fine clothes and books (338), of merely superficial achievements. Yet Pip will remain in some degree a guilty subject, since the guilty order of the novel recognises repentance, but does not necessarily fully extricate its characters from complicity in evil. Pip's adult "crime" in the novel, apart from his abuse of his own potential, has been his treatment of Joe, the "true gentleman" of *Great Expectations*. Pip's crime is ethical rather than legal, an ingratitude which is also a turning away from roots, friendship, mutual respect and history. But *Great Expectations* also uncomfortably tries to elide Joe's own complicity in the crimes committed against Pip. For all his gentleness, Joe cannot mitigate Mrs Joe's domestic violence. Rather pointedly, the novel offers Joe's explanation:

> 'I see so much in my poor mother, of a woman drudging and slaving and breaking her honest heart and never getting no peace in her mortal days, that I'm dead afeerd of going wrong in the way of not doing what's right by a woman, and I'd fur rather of the two go wrong t'other way, and be a little ill-conwenienced myself. I wish it was only me that got put out, Pip; I wish there weren't no Tickler for you, old chap; I wish I could take it all on myself, But

> this is the up-and-down-and-straight on it, Pip, and I hope you'll overlook shortcomings.' (80)

Joe's testimony is not a justification; his wishes cannot substitute for actions, and Joe succeeds only in bending to violence while failing to protect the innocent, Pip or himself. This, then, is Joe's crime towards Pip, and it is merely the complicity of a good but weak man in the world who has not the capacity to alter the evil that he sees around him. Pip's ingratitude, though he never admits it, is his punishment of Joe. Accepting his mysterious patrimony he effectively rejects Joe and his role as father-figure. Towards the end of the novel, Pip and Joe are again reconciled, as Pip re-enters a kind of child-like dependency, his illness. Yet though Pip is able to forgive Joe, acceptance is not necessarily justification. As Pip regains strength, the bond between the two weakens. They remain friends, but Joe is no longer the foster-parent he could never really be to the mature Pip, who understands more clearly than Joe the complexities of guilt. If the detective novel is, as Umberto Eco suggests, concerned with the problem of all metaphysics and psychology — who is guilty — then Pip learns through the skein of clues that eventually everybody, even Joe, is guilty, but his search for the truth and his recognition of the hidden order also leads to Pip's chance to create for himself a new maturity.

4.5. Detection, Recognition, Recovery.

Pip, the perennial orphan, both loses and gains parental figures, and loses them again. He abandons Joe for the dream of Satis House, discovers Magwitch, loses Magwitch, and makes a final, abortive return to Joe. His great expectations are a kind of secular drama of a divine providence — the source of Pip's money is a mysterious patrimony and a secret about which he winds his own presumptions, always ignoring or overlooking the clues which direct him towards the true source of his fortunes. The double-narrative, meanwhile, moves towards a point of intersection and revelation, the discovery scene where Pip is confronted by his convict once again and must learn the true origin of his expectations. At that moment, the terms gentleman-convict collapse.

The young gentleman, Pip, is the product of the older convict's money. This moment of recognition for Pip is profoundly catastrophic, the destruction of his great expectations. Pip says that he is "wrecked" and his ship "gone to pieces" (341). Yet this is not the end of the book, merely the "END OF THE SECOND STAGE OF PIP'S EXPECTATIONS" (342). What follows is an intensification of the adventure plot, as Pip tries to bring Magwitch out of the country, and Pip's most conscious and directed act of detection. Once Magwitch's shocking revelations free Pip of his delusions, he is prepared to look clearly at the clues that surround him, first recognising even a kind of mysterious foreshadowing in the approach of his patron himself: "I began either to imagine or recall that I had had mysterious warnings of this man's approach" (341). Pip is alerted now to the signs of the second narrative, the true nature of his world, and he begins to pursue it in earnest. His search as a detective is an act, in itself, of renewal and recovery, and also of self-knowledge.

Pip's adventure narrative comprises his attempt to deliver Magwitch safely out of the country. It is driven by two imperatives: firstly, Pip's anxiety to get Magwitch away; and secondly, Pip's fear of surveillance, intervention and revenge by Compeyson and his associates. Pip may fear for his patron's life, but his urgency and unhappiness stem also from a deep sense of resentment — to get Magwitch out of England is also to eject him from Pip's life. But Pip has been irrevocably changed by Magwitch's return, and the adventure plot makes this clear. Returning to his own lodging, he finds a note from Wemmick: "'DON'T GO HOME'" (379). The phrase resonates through a disturbed and anxious night for Pip (379-81). Of course he cannot go home, not just because of the danger, but because Magwitch, by his very presence, has destroyed Pip's home in a number of ways. No longer the boy he was, Pip cannot go home; no longer the man he thought he was, Pip has no home. Thrown out into the world of observation and fear, Pip constantly expects, and comes close to, some encounter with Compeyson or his followers as they develop their plan: "Still I knew there was cause for alarm, and I could not get rid of the notion of being watched. Once

received, it is a haunting idea" (393). Haunted, cautious, Pip becomes alert, entering a state of heightened perception.

Pip's plan to get Magwitch out of the country fails. For Pip, there is no direct route out of his difficulties. As much as he desires it, there is no easy extrication. This is foreshadowed by the place where Magwitch is hidden while Pip and Herbert prepare their plan. Pip has "no other guide to Chinks's Basin than the Old Green Copper Rope-Walk" (387), and in his journey to the house he loses himself among "many rope-walks that were not the Old Green Copper" (387). Thus, Magwitch's hiding place itself is at the centre of a kind of maze for Pip. The rope-walk, where strands are woven into coherent lengths, repeats the textual thread of knitting and linking, of winding together the threads of the story. And yet, because Pip loses his way among many rope-walks, they also represent entrapment, the sense in which Pip feels himself dreadfully caught up in the skein of clues, in an unwanted relationship with Magwitch and his world. The river route presents itself as the clear, direct route out of Pip's difficulties, but this route is compromised, blocked at the crucial moment when Pip and Magwitch are nearest to escape. This failure of the adventure also marks a point of growing empathy with Magwitch. Pip, by becoming both criminal and hunted man with his convict, begins to develop the empathic basis for understanding Magwitch. Under the suspense of their escape, Pip begins to see Magwitch more clearly: "It occurred to me as inconsistent, that for any mastering idea, he should have endangered his freedom and even his life. But I reflected that perhaps freedom without danger was too much apart from all the habit of his existence to be to him what it would be to another man" (447). Magwitch's praise of Pip as his "Faithful dear boy" (446) marks the growing bond between them, but this escape attempt is also doomed, and Pip must discover that there is no easy answer to his fear and alienation. The adventure plot is, however, one thread in a tightly coherent account in which Pip's active efforts and his anxious, heightened awareness point to his struggles to make sense of the events that engulf him. This struggle encompasses not only Pip's attempt to rescue Magwitch but

Pip's complementary efforts to trace the significance of Magwitch's history in his own life.

Magwitch's story, coming after his reappearance as Pip's benefactor, ends with the discovery of the shadowy principle of Compeyson. Yet immediately Pip's thoughts turn to Estella:

> Why should I pause to ask how much of my shrinking from Provis might be traced to Estella? Why should I loiter on my road, to compare the state of mind in which I had tried to rid myself of the stain of the prison before meeting her at the coach-office, with the state of mind in which I now reflected on the abyss between Estella in her pride and beauty, and the returned transport whom I harboured? (367)

It is at that meeting with Estella outside the coach-office that Pip first becomes aware of the "nameless shadow" of Estella's resemblance to her mother. The rhetorical nature of the question, the fear of its consequences, points towards Pip's new-found awareness of the importance of these subliminal suspicions. Pip is not a conscious detective in that he must doggedly pursue the clues that hang about his life; he is already surrounded by clues, but he does show a new willingness to confront the facts directly and openly. First he must face Miss Havisham, yet in this meeting he also encounters Estella, and Pip emphasises again how closely she is bound with him, how strongly she is connected with Pip's dream of his great expectations:

> You are part of my existence, part of myself. You have been in every line I have ever read.... You have been in every prospect I have ever seen since — on the river, on the sails of the ships, on the marshes, in the clouds, in the light, in the darkness, in the wind, in the woods, in the seas, in the streets. (378)

It is remarkable that even in the failure of his expectations Pip cannot disengage Estella from his consciousness.

To some extent Pip already is a gentleman, at least in sensibilities, but Estella is already subconsciously, for Pip, bound into the Magwitch narrative which he is beginning to untangle. Even when Estella breaks the bond between them by insisting on marriage to Bentley Drummle, Pip can still say that she is "part of my character, part of the little good in me, part of the evil" (378). For Pip, Estella has always been bound intensely to his desire for gentility: she is the focal point in the narrative of Satis House, the heroine of his romance fantasy. But as Pip traces her true origins, he finds

out her place in the submerged narrative of criminality. Her origins are in Magwitch and his tale, as much as in Miss Havisham's. Hence, Pip's investigations constitute a transfer of narrative energies — they shift Estella from one narrative to another, powerfully relocating her out of Pip's discourse of great expectations and into the discourse of guilt and criminality. We are able to see Pip follow Estella, the thread in Pip's poor labyrinth, through the lies of Miss Havisham's revenge into the true world of Magwitch's suffering and imprisonment. Her shift in status reflects the shift in Pip's own knowledge of himself. Effectively navigating the double-narrative, she is revealed in a new and telling light, no longer the symbol of Pip's aspirations but symbol of the fallen world with which he must now deal. No wonder, then, that Pip pursues the problem of her origins without ever fully understanding his motives, for a thread in a maze can only be followed; its turns cannot be anticipated: "What purpose I had in view when I was hot in tracing out and proving Estella's parentage, I cannot say. It will presently be seen that the question was not before me in a distinct shape, until it was put before me by heads wiser than my own" (420). Nevertheless, when this narrative transfer is complete, the results seem ambiguous, since Pip is burdened with a knowledge which he cannot then enunciate.

The problem of knowledge in *Great Expectations* is most powerfully represented by the figure of Jaggers, the lawyer, the "wiser head" who puts Pip's own conundrum before him. If Pip, throughout the novel, suppresses knowledge, recognition, suspicion, it is Jaggers who is most adept at not knowing what he knows, of scrupulously rendering doubt as ignorance. The very precision with which Jaggers renders language makes it more obscure, concealing rather than elucidating truths: "'But did you say "told" or "informed"...? Told would seem to imply verbal communication. You can't have verbal communication with a man in New South Wales, you know'" (350). Nevertheless, Jaggers is well aware of the situation; he simply refuses, as he advises Pip, to "commit" (350) himself or anyone. Jaggers is a defence attorney who deals with and protects a host of petty criminals. He is adept in deploying the presumption of innocence against assumed guilt, as he does at the bar of

the Three Jolly Bargemen (161-2). Yet despite this, the man projects an aura of guilt and contamination — "a manner expressive of knowing something secret about every one of us that could effectually do for each individual if he chose to disclose it" (163) — which is symbolised by his obsessive cleanliness and hand-washing in scented soap. Jaggers enjoys the fear and dependency of his clients, whom he bullies and protects. His power comes from what he knows about his clients and what he can disguise about them, and this seems to inspire an almost mystical awe. Van Ghent writes that "Jaggers is the representative not only of civil law but of universal Law, which is profoundly mysterious in a world of dissociated and apparently lawless fragments" (128). Anthony Winner concurs that "Jaggers as a sub-deity spawned by and representative of a perverse society is distinctly unappealing, and most of Dickens' references to him cast him in this role: an embodiment of the manifest injustices of civil law" (111). Despite his influence, Jaggers is no deity, not even of a minor order; he is an initiate, a high priest and interpreter of mysteries, whose power is ambiguously predicated on the condition that he cannot communicate that which he knows, that he must reserve secrets in order to maintain their status as secrets. As an initiate, Jaggers asserts his mastery through his ability to interpret a threatening and arbitrary legal system, but his insider's stance between the defendant and the law implies that he already knows, that no crime is opaque to him, and what characterises him is that he does know the truth, but that he will not tell. Thus Jaggers, though a legal defender, is always marked by his accusatorial insights. As an interpreter of the law's powers, his domain is determined by its contradictions, and so Jaggers's own powers can appear limited or cruel. Nevertheless, within the law's confines, and within the sociological sphere of the urban poor, Jaggers is an absolute master.

Jaggers as initiate is an example of a class of character in Dickens whose roles are often ambiguous if not antagonistic. Those who know, yet maintain command of their secrets, include the other lawyer, Tulkinghorn, detectives such as Bucket and Mr Inspector, and the brooding Mrs Clennam. Jaggers occupies an uneasy point between the detectives and the blackmailing lawyer, Tulkinghorn. Like the detectives, he is

entirely an urban man, whose power extends over a mass of crime and poverty. Yet Jaggers's nature as initiate, and the fragile contingency of knowledge, secrecy and power, may help us to read more clearly the scene in which Pip finally confronts him with his conclusions about Estella's parentage.

When Pip first decides to challenge Jaggers, we have seen that he has no clear purpose in mind but his resolution to pursue the case. As Pip outlines his findings to Jaggers, we see twice a pause, "an indefinably attentive stop" (422) in Jaggers's manner, since Pip is now dealing in secrets, Jaggers's own stock-in-trade. Yet Jaggers assumes that Pip's knowledge has come from Magwitch-Provis, and only when Pip denies this does Jaggers come to an absolute stop. The magical totem of the handkerchief is rendered powerless: "For once, the powerful pocket-handkerchief failed. My reply was so unexpected that Mr Jaggers put the handkerchief back into his pocket without completing the usual performance" (422). What so disturbs Jaggers is not merely that the secret is out, but that Pip *knows something*, knows something that Jaggers himself *does not know*. For the initiate's power is founded on knowledge, on a unique and individual command of a mystery, and Pip's assertion of knowledge over this mystery temporarily wins him the upper hand. Jaggers is evasive, but Pip is not to be denied: "I would not submit to be thrown off in that way" (423). In the course of his appeal, he similarly reveals the secret about Wemmick's personal life. Pip challenges both Jaggers's and Wemmick's command of superior knowledge and secrecy.

Both Wemmick and Jaggers are now on the defensive. Jaggers tells his story; he makes his own defence, and characteristically this is as an address before a magistrate. It is in this that Jaggers is shown at his best, a manipulator of mystery who acts on behalf of providence: "'Put the case, Pip, that here was one pretty little child out of the heap who could be saved'" (425). In a corrupt and criminal world, Jaggers uses his knowledge to attempt to secure at least one life — it is a compassionate, redemptive

gesture[39]. We can see that Jaggers elucidates the ancient link between mystery, mastery and the divinity. As an initiate, Jaggers is master of his urban profession, a popular lawyer, and as such he oversees those mysteries of the guild that validate the enactment of the Mystery Play, a representation of God's mystery. Standing between the subject and secular law, Jaggers for once acts on behalf of divine necessity, extending forgiveness, clearing the way for the "one... who could be saved" not simply from the law but virtually from the original sin of the parents. Yet from this providential stance there is still a movement towards secular imperatives. Jaggers protects his secrets and the strict legality from which his ability to intervene is exercised: "'I make no admissions,'" to which Pip assents. In doing so, in accepting Jaggers's case, Pip again alters the balance of power.

> Jaggers moves to secure the secrecy on which his power depends:
>
> > For whose sake would you reveal the secret? For the father's? I think he would not be much the better for the mother. For the mother's? I think if she had done the deed she would be safer where she was. For the daughter's? I think it would hardly serve her, to establish her parentage for the information of her husband, and to drag her back to disgrace.... (426)

Peter Brook is partly right in concluding that "there is no gain to be had from knowledge" (135), but only partly. There is a gain in seeing Estella in her true light, of breaking Pip further from the false dream of his expectations. There is a maturity in knowing for Pip, but the predicate of this knowledge is silence. For the possessor of a mystery, only the policy of "no admissions" maintains the truth. Pip's decision is ethical, as is the case Jaggers put, but it is bounded by a radical limitation of the power of knowledge. When Jaggers has finished, Pip reports, "I looked at Wemmick, whose face was very grave. He gravely touched his lips with his forefinger. I did the same. Mr Jaggers did the same" (426). The forefinger is in play again, making the traditional gesture of silence. This time it is shared by all three men. At this moment, they are all entirely urban men, committed to silence, committed to complicity in the mysteries of the world they inhabit. Pip, Jaggers and Wemmick are now equally initiates, equally in

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[39]. Though the eccentric (if not insane) Miss Havisham is hardly the best choice for a child placement.

the know yet compromised by secrecy. Pip has changed subtly since he entered Jaggers's office: searching for the truth, he has also found the ethical responsibilities of knowing.

Pip's final revelation to the dying Magwitch, to tell him that he has a living daughter, is more, then, than a sentimental impulse. By breaking with the code of silence at this point, Pip shows his maturity and his greater humanity. He refuses to selfishly hoard knowledge and renders it as a gift. The silence that follows in Magwitch's death, the silence that validates the secret, is providentially, and not humanly, determined. Pip can also honestly say, "'She is a lady and very beautiful. And I love her!'" (470). Once, the convergence of a lady and the daughter of a convict would have seemed impossible to Pip, an unthinkable soiling of gentility with the prison taint. His own investigations as a detective have enabled him to transfer Estella, and all her associations, from the illusory world of his Satis House fantasies to the true, corrupted yet redeemable world of the prison. Pip now has the maturity, and the awareness, to love honestly.

4.6. Mastering the Clues.

The mature Pip creates order out of memory through the processes of art. Narrating his life and expectations, he seeks to master the experience. And the reader follows Pip, mastering the clues spun out by his story in turn. As the mystery is solved, the plot is resolved. On the one hand, we see the conclusion of a kind of double-narrative of crime and investigation, such as that which informs the unfinished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood.* We also see, through the skein of clues detected by Pip's actions, a rich pattern of recurrence and resemblance similar to the analogical structure of *Our Mutual Friend,* pointing towards the submerged guilty order of Pip's society. Yet Pip, now master of his own mystery, in another fashion makes "no admissions," having closed, in a very real sense, with the insight and knowledge of a character like Jaggers. That is, while we know who the mature Pip is very clearly, we

have no sense of his circumstances. Is he married, happy, in England, or still the bachelor clerk of a small trading concern in Egypt? We are not shown a point of exit, a perspective outside of Pip's narrative. Dickens's chosen ending for *Great Expectations* remains an ambiguous one. Appropriately, Pip travels to the ruins of Satis House, the ruins of his great expectations, close by to the self-enclosed innocence of Joe and Biddy's home, the forge to which Pip cannot now return, since he has accepted his status as urban man and initiate, a knower of secrets permanently implicated in their guilt. Estella is also there. She too has learnt through experience, and though she herself will never know it, to the reader and Pip, the foster-daughter of Miss Havisham is now the spiritual and actual daughter of Magwitch, while Pip himself, having lost all inheritances, is merely his own creation. Ambiguously, Pip and Estella will "continue, friends apart" (493), leaving us at a junction in the maze. It is right that Pip should end with Estella, the thread in his "poor labyrinth," but Pip has only ever asked us to follow him into his maze. Despite our mastery of the clues, he has never suggested that there is a way out.

5. Personal Guilts and National Crimes:

Secrecy and Mystery in *A Tale of Two Cities.*

The secret of Man's Being is still like the Sphinx's secret: a riddle that he cannot rede; and for ignorance of which he suffers death, the worst death, a spiritual.... Nevertheless there is something great in the moment when a man first strips himself of adventitious wrappages; and sees indeed that he is naked, and, as Swift has it, "a forked straddling animal with bandy legs"; yet also a Spirit, and unutterable Mystery of Mysteries.

— Carlyle, *The French Revolution.*

5.1. Mysteries in History.

The reader is struck by a Dickens novel in which courts, crimes, murders, secrecy and guilt, lawyers and spies, are repeated motifs; but this is not *Great Expectations*. There is a novel in which Dickens persistently emphasises the problem of the mysteries of the human mind; but this is not *The Mystery of Edwin Drood.* This work contains no figure who acts consistently as a detective, and, in fact, no policemen at all, but the locus of its drama repeatedly returns to the court and the prison, and the contests of guilt and innocence played out there. This novel is *A Tale of Two Cities*, and the court is a Revolutionary Tribunal. *A Tale of Two Cities* is dense with typically Dickensian concerns, falling between the prisons of *Little Dorrit* and *Great Expectations*, and foreshadowing the psychology of secrets and secret selves in *Edwin Drood*[1], yet these themes are entangled in Dickens's treatment of the French Revolution. *A Tale of Two Cities* is a novel of revolutionary action, action presented by Dickens in the form of short weekly parts, an arrangement he found extremely constricting (Glancy 58-9). Like *Hard Times*, it attracts, in its emphasis of plot over character, the appellation of an "un-Dickensian" Dickens novel (Glancy 13). However, because *A Tale of Two Cities* is about revolution, plot, mystery and secrecy, and *Hard Times* is an exercise in polemics, openly projecting the fall of the house of Gradgrind

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1. Manette's "doubled" state of mind — Shoemaker and Doctor — may have some interesting analogies with the "doubled" John Jasper.

from its first pages, *A Tale of Two Cities* is appropriate for this study of Dickensian mysteries in a way that *Hard Times* is not[2]. As Maglavera notes of *Hard Times*: "Mystery-oriented analepses are kept to a minimum and are presented in ways that undermine the importance that the element of mystery could have had as a factor in the creation of narrative interest" (67). In the Revolution, however, we see a contest between the individual and the crowd, and in the plot of *A Tale of Two Cities* we see enacted the same struggle between individual mysteries and the invasive powers of the courts.

Reading the historical Revolution in the form of a novel requires that the political must be represented as the personal. In his telling of the historical story, Dickens also generalises as he analyses, allowing the French Revolution to address contemporary fears. To represent the crowd and the mob, Dickens narrates the lives of a few participants, but in the Revolution the two are often profoundly in conflict. Firstly, the mob seems to subsume and dehumanise its constituents, becoming a multi-headed beast of its own, as the mob is often referred to in the singular, by the personal name of the district, Saint Antoine. The chaos that explodes out of a quarter of Paris may, indeed, represent to Dickens's immediate readership the fear of a similar chaos erupting out of the urban squalor of London. Thus *A Tale of Two Cities*, where even the title foregrounds its urban concerns, struggles with urban mystery. Secondly, the Revolutionary Tribunal, an expression of the will to vengeance of the crowd, and a consequence of the indifference and abuses of the establishment, breaks in forcefully on the individual, stripping away secrets and condemning on the strength of those secrets. As Catherine Gallagher, and others, point out, narrative omniscience duplicates the manner in which the Revolutionary court exposes secrets, invades homes and the privacy of the individual mind[3]. Behind the powers of the Revolution lurk the

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2. Though *Hard Times* toys with a crime in the plot (the bank robbery), we are not especially encouraged to see the whole novel as a mystery, and there is no shock in the confirmation of the culprit's identity, nor any possibility that Stephen Blackpool is really guilty. See Maglavera 67, where she analyses the role of suspense in *Hard Times*.

3. See Baumgarten, Gallagher and Lloyd for their work on the analogy between narrative and Revolution.

powers of the police and courts mobilised to control the city itself. Thus, the unfolding of Dickens's mystery plot is an enactment also of the fears and dangers of revolution, discovering that new entity the city, while foregrounding the problematics of the historical Revolution through its dialogue with mystery. This leads to Dickens's critique of the Revolution (though this should never be understood as a vindication of the *ancien régime*). Ultimately, the Revolution destroys itself, devouring the one in the violence of the many, and mysteries and secrets long held in the mind prove destructive when unburied, and the punishment of old wrongs proves futile. Progessively, the text seeks a greater mystery, a transcendent mystery that can reconcile the stresses between public knowledge and private integrity. Narrative must be redeemed from Revolutionary fanaticism, enabled not as oppression but as resistance to the Terror. This is the mystery of Resurrection, inserted at the point where Doctor Manette fails and Sydney Carton takes over, asserting his mastery over private secrets and the city of Paris. This providential resolution is possible, however, only in the context of a failure of secular authority — in the secular plot of spies, prisons, courts and informers — and in the aspiration of the Revolution to a timeless authority to judge and condemn. The Revolutionary Tribunal asserts its power through assuming the formal structures and authority of the courts, creating, theoretically, an arena for the contesting of various truths, but it is apparent that the Tribunal also assumes, on behalf of revolutionaries such as Madame Defarge, the powers of the Last Judgement, usurping God's place in the order of time and providence. The Revolution attempts to combine secular and divine authority, but succeeds only in creating a kind of monstrous confusion, like the dance of the Carmagnole, in which past and future, life and death, are destructively compounded. Thus, the providential conclusion arises out of a certain secular anxiety. Carton's transcendant gesture of self-sacrifice, a dramatisation of his personal love in imitation of Christ's passion, is intended to allow new narratives in the movement of time and history. Dickens's mystery plot, in the secrets of the Doctor of Beauvais and

beyond, then, is not a simple peripheral device, but an integral part of the development of his novel.

5.2. The Doctor of Beauvais.

Jarvis Lorry sets out on an indistinct mission in a world literally misty, but also suspicious, mysterious, immersed in signs and ambiguous portents which hold only fragmentary meaning: "'This is a secret service altogether. My credentials, entries and memoranda are all comprehended in that one line, "Recalled to Life;" which may mean anything'" (58). Lorry's England, presented in his journey, is suspicious, paranoid, watchful, as though it shared France's potential for disaster. In this world, Jarvis Lorry acts as an emissary for narrative: uncovering the past, his intervention, his excavation, is the point where plot is initiated, entered into the discursive process which is a disturbance of an initial stasis. Here Jarvis Lorry enters into the uncertain dilatory territory of the text. Like the reader, Lorry undertakes a journey towards an undertermined end, and like a detective, he seeks to excavate a long-concealed wrong. Briefly, then, Lorry shares in the narrative imperatives of a character like Bucket, or even Pip, returning to the past to unearth its significance. But, unlike these characters, he is not moving towards the conclusion, the point where he can present the facts of the case, but rather initiating that whole process, the first individual to announce that mystery (the history of Alexandre Manette) that the following text will be predicated on. Lorry is propelled to burrow into history, to bring it out, to make it tell itself. But the project of resurrection, like Lorry's dreams, is uncertain, frightening, and the enquiry elicits an ambiguous response:

> 'Buried how long?'
> 'Eighteen years.'
> 'I hope you care to live?'
> 'I can't say.' (47)

Manette's unwillingness to say, to speak of his condition, delimits the silence of the prisoner, the resistance to narrative. Lorry's mission is to break that silence, to bring

the prisoner back to life. His narrative function here is thought of positively, but it is checked by an unconscious denial, a desire for silence that enfolds the subject of his search in an apparently impenetrable mystery.

The narrative orbits this mystery, attracted towards it and yet suspended at the impasse of the un-narratable:

> A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other. A solemn consideration, when I enter a great city at night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret; that every beating heart in the hundreds of thousands of breasts there, is, in some of its imaginings, a secret to the heart nearest it! Something of the awfulness, even of Death itself, is referable to this. (44)

This secrecy brings closure to narrative, but it does not obliterate narrative process, merely terminates it at some point beyond which mystery cannot be penetrated: "No more can I turn the leaves of this book that I loved, and vainly hope in time to read it all" (44). But this mystery is also rendered as an urban mystery, the problem of comprehending the "great city at night" broken down into its enclosed houses, its constituent, private secrets. The city focuses this "solemn consideration" of our individuated secrets through the clustering houses. The problem of population, of the "hundreds of thousands," emphasises this difficulty, which is in turn referred back to the horrors of death. And in the city, even the nearest intimacy is shown to be ineffectual. The urban masses and the one hold their secrets in close proximity.

The first dark mystery of the human heart in *A Tale of Two Cities* is kept by Alexandre Manette, the Doctor of Beauvais. The prisoner, buried for eighteen years in a condition that resembles death, as his daughter believes he is dead, loses even the primary sense of individuality inherent in a personal name — he is "One Hundred and Five, North Tower" (73) — yet despite the erasure of surface identity, he retains that profound inward secrecy that protects his selfhood. Manette, detained by the Evremonds, is held in silence, unable to denounce his captors. Yet prisoners in *A Tale of Two Cities* find a way to narrate, in secret, their own dilemmas, to at once conceal and tell. As Darnay notes in an anecdote: "'What the unknown prisoner had written will never be read, but he had written something, and hidden it away to keep it from the

gaoler'" (131). The plot of *A Tale of Two Cities* will turn on such hidden writings, for Manette contains, in his own head, secrets that cannot be divined:

> No human intelligence could have read the mysteries of his mind, in the scared blank wonder of his face. Whether he knew what had happened, whether he recollected what they had said to him, whether he knew he was free, were questions which no sagacity could have solved. (79)

Yet it is on the process of resolving these secrets that the plot of *A Tale of Two Cities* hinges.

The gradual revelation of the contents of the mind of Doctor Manette constitutes the impetus of both a personal psychological plot and a national plot. Dickens took great care to present the development of Doctor Manette as faithfully as possible. The business of coherently presenting the condition of the mind of the long-term prisoner without abruptly foreclosing, and thereby collapsing, the events of his initial trauma, was contiguous in Dickens's mind with "laying the ground," the sense of carefully preparing and revealing plot.

> I think the business of art is to lay all that ground carefully, not with the care that conceals itself — to shew, by a backward light, what everything has been working to — but only to *suggest* until the fulfilment comes. These are the ways of Providence, of which all art is but a little imitation. (*Letters to Wilkie Collins* 95)

The Doctor's gestures, relapses and actions suggest something of a fearful resurgence of the past, and a chronic distrust, yet nothing is explicit: "His face had become frozen... in a very curious look at Darnay: an intent look, deepening into a frown of dislike, and distrust, not even unmixed with fear" (112). Dickens is careful to maintain distance between the Doctor and the reader, even hiding both Manette and Darnay, on the morning of the latter's marriage to the former's daughter, as Darnay reveals his own secret (223). Manette's major relapse is a consequence of this, coherent with the psychology of the character, yet equally alarming to the reader, Miss Pross and Mr Lorry. Through gradually evolving and revealing Manette's secrets, his past traumas, through these suggestive gestures, Dickens builds suspense and draws the reader into the story.

Yet Manette's mental efforts are not directed towards revelation; he has no modern psychological impulse towards confession as a means of facing and exorcising this trauma, and his repressive instincts are shared by Miss Pross and Mr Lorry, who destroy and burn the physical reminder of Prisoner One Hundred and Five, the shoemaker's workbench: "There, with closed doors, and in a mysterious and guilty manner, Mr Lorry hacked the shoemaker's bench to pieces, while Miss Pross held the candle as if she were assisting at a murder" (235). This act is futile. Their guilt is the guilt of those trying to in some way murder the Doctor's double. The text operates against secrecy, even the mental secrecy of Doctor Manette. The activities of the Resurrection men are shrouded in guilt and abhorrence, yet bringing the dead back to life, or delving into the secrets of the dead (as an anatomist does) are major themes of the novel[4]. The plot aims towards a point of revelation, but this revelation uncovers not merely a mental trauma but a national crime.

The narrative of the Doctor of Beauvais details the circumstances of his arrest and imprisonment. That Manette has been a prisoner the reader has always known, but up until now we have never known why. Manette's reversion to the Shoemaker when the associations with the prison come upon him effectively guard against his consciously referring to that circumstance. It takes the narrative of his imprisonment to forcefully push him back into consciousness of those events. The circumstances of the Doctor's imprisonment duplicate the condition of France under the *ancien régime.* In the first place, long term imprisonment without trial resembles the use of the letter *de cachet* with which the Marquis threatens his nephew, Darnay. The aristocrat is simply reverting to form in employing a document of repression, which the Marquis defends as, "'These little instruments of correction, these gentle aids to the power and honour of families'" (152). But the crimes of the aristocracy, which they bury through the offices of the letter, are figured in miniature by the crimes of the older Evremond brothers.

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4. See Hutter, "The Novelist as Resurrectionist," for a closer analysis of the analogy between the Resurrection men and delving into secrets and mysteries. Sanders also deals broadly with "ideas of death and resurrection in Dickens' fiction in the context of his time" (3), but, oddly, devotes only a few cursory pages to *A Tale of Two Cities* (169-70).

The murder of a woman's husband, her rape and the murder of her brother, stand for the crimes and brutalities of the aristocracy. As the wounded boy says, "'They plunder us, outrage us, beat us, kill us,'" and his denunciation goes on to reiterate a series of monstrous rights: "'rights... in the modesty and virtue of our sisters.... Rights... to harness us common dogs to carts.... Rights to keep us in their grounds all night, quieting the frogs" (353-5). Manette's long hidden manuscript then, like the narration of the crime in the double-narrative, contains in miniature all the repressions that gave rise to the Revolution.

The reading of Doctor Manette's manuscript resembles the climax of the double-narrative, the moment of revelation when the initiating crime that has led to all the events in the novel is conclusively narrated. Albert Hutter observes in "Nation and Regeneration in *A Tale of Two Cities*" that "The events Manette describes, a microcosm of the larger narrative, trigger the major actions and reversals of the double plot" (448). Hutter's version of the double plot is not the double-narrative, since he refers to the doubling of Manette's personal experiences with the story of national crimes, but in the same article Hutter describes the events of the Doctor's narrative as a type of the "primal scene," a psychological term which has been applied in detective fiction to nominate the crime, the essential trauma and the moment of horrific discovery, towards which a backward reading always tends[5]. Manette's manuscript is therefore doubled in both ways: as part of the double-narrative it unearths a crime both personal and national. Charles Darnay, Alexandre Manette, the Evremonds, the Defarges, are all set on a collision course by the actions described in the letter. These events are also symbolic of the crimes and abuses of the aristocracy. The chain of oppression and violence is formalised in Manette's manuscript, and its reading provides a definitive link with the past.

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[5]. See Pederson-Krag in Most & Stowe (eds) 13-20. Detective and mystery fictions also share similarities with the psychology of dream analysis, as Jarvis Lorry's almost dreamlike trip to Dover and France might indicate.

Ruth Glancy argues that when the Manette manuscript emerges "there is no trick ending here, no surprising overthrow of the reader's expectations, as happens in a detective novel, although Dickens creates suspense and suggests clues in the manner of the crime story (partly invented by his friend Wilkie Collins)" (64). Glancy is correct in that we have never expected anything other than an horrific revelation in the Doctor's letter, but Dickens does manage a remarkable inversion of what was to become a standard of detective and mystery fiction, despite his resistance to the kind of mystification Wilkie Collins specialised in. The revelation is not a restorative of either moral or political justice; the truth does not re-establish the order of the world. In the detective fiction that evolved after *The Moonstone* and *Edwin Drood*, particularly in the Golden Age of the genre, a kind of unreflective correlation always associated the solution of the empirical mystery with the restoration of moral order. This, of course, is also a form of secularisation, proceeding until the crime and solution became a puzzle, a mere end in itself, morally and ethically self-sufficient[6]. In *A Tale of Two Cities* there is no such correlation, no moral triumph in the solution of the crimes against Manette. The usually positive conclusion of detective fiction is here rendered purely as a catastrophe. No more alarming a "twist" is imaginable.

It would seem that the mysteries of the mind are not nearly so secure as the opening to chapter three would make out. The Doctor of Beauvais becomes, in fact, an open character, whose traumas and disasters, the accusations of his secret despair, are read in full, both through the court and through the text. The secrets of death and of the prison are not inviolable — the narrative forces their revelation. However, the reading of the manuscript, the catastrophe of its discovery, does not free the Doctor from the bondage of the past, nor does it effect any kind of moral closure upon the events of the Revolution. Manette is reduced again to the Shoemaker. Early in the text we have asked, "'I hope you care to live,'" and been answered, "'I can't say'" (47). Driven to

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6. This is the case, at least, in the detective fictions of the Golden Age (the period between the two World Wars). Post-modern writers have engaged with and sometimes overthrown this formula. Of particular interest is the work of P.D James, who in excavating the secular crime usually finds a kind of moral vacuum in the space once occupied by God.

"say" by the court, to disclose his trauma, the energetic, self-realised Doctor again dies, transformed into the prisoner-shoemaker. The Court opens up the hidden mind of the good Doctor, but exposes both his contradictions and its own need for revenge through him. The man who can remember "'a child, a pretty boy from two to three years old'" and his mother, the wife of the Marquis, as "'a good, compassionate lady'" (360), can find the capacity less than a few pages afterwards to denounce them as the race and descendants of his persecutors:

> 'I believe that the mark of the red cross is fatal to them, and that they have no part in His mercies. And them and their descendants, to the last of their race, I, Alexandre Manette, unhappy prisoner, do this last night of the year 1767, in my unbearable agony, denounce to the times when all these things shall be answered for. I denounce them to Heaven and to earth.' (361)

The liberal Doctor, in time, rejects this denunciation. But in the prison he is subject to the same pressure, the same desire for absolute revenge, that affects the mob. When his denunciation is read out by the Tribunal, Doctor Manette's fatal condemnation is validated by the judgement of the court. Manette's desires and the desires of Saint Antoine are shown to be equivalent — by assuming his cause on his behalf, Madame Defarge, the Jacques and the Vengeances, subsume his wrong within their own, and elucidate them through their Tribunal. The district, the urban crowd, assume the cause of the individual. Eventually, Manette transcends this hatred whereas the mob cannot. Yet even though Manette is presented as a good man, and even heroic in some respects, this kind of violent fury must still be seen as part of his potentiality as a human being. The paradox of the hero of the Revolution, at once immune from the revolutionary court and hopelessly complicit in its condemnations, is an unbearable contradiction, an unreadable mystery which is inscribed with all of the contradictions and violences of the Revolution. Dickens calls these by the near oxymoron of "suicidal vengeance" (344). Manette's rebellion and denunciation eventually destroy the innocent and virtually destroy him. Against his will, his secrets drive the paradox of revolutionary action.

5.3. The Revolutionary Tribunal.

The court might be conceived of as a certain locus of mystery and truth. Its inner workings, like the law represented by Jaggers in *Great Expectations*, are mysterious; its public concern is with issues of authority, right and, naturally, the truth. The court is the arena in which versions of the truth are promulgated, circulated and ultimately judged. Yet the Revolutionary court is not merely a failure: it is itself as brutal as the institutions it seeks to convict and destroy. Dickens moves his narrative from the British court in London, blood-thirsty and reliant on the tainted evidence of professional informers, to the court of the Revolution in Paris. The first is conservative, but the second, theoretically set up in opposition to the first, is even worse. The Tribunal has its genesis in the abuses of the monarchist court:

> Before that unjust Tribunal, there was little or no order of procedure, ensuring any accused person any reasonable hearing. There could have been no such Revolution, if all laws, forms, and ceremonies, had not first been so monstrously abused, that the suicidal vengeance of the Revolution was to scatter them all to the winds. (344)

Nevertheless, the reading of documents and the taking of the evidence of witnesses remains part of the ceremonies of the court, and in the examination of the past the court is "quick with its work" (346), in a kind of parodic efficiency by which it assumes the forms and conventions of the old court. The Tribunal exposes mystery, breaking into the secrets of the mind, and thus operates analogously to the processes of narrative itself. Doctor Manette's final humiliation is prefaced by the phrase, "'Let it be read'" (348), and at the end of the reading:

> A terrible sound arose when the reading of this document was done. A sound of craving and eagerness that had nothing articulate in it but blood. The narrative called up the most revengeful passions of the time, and there was not a head in the nation but must have dropped before it. (361)

Reading comes to articulate nothing but a debased blood craving. How then can narrative approach mystery without summoning up futile vengeance? The process of substitution allows for the articulation but also the containment of mystery, in that what can be definitively expressed can also be categorised. Mystery secularised further

expresses itself through the operation of the secular court, but by what process does this narrative cognizance become invasive, and can it be avoided? The problem is not merely narratological, but political and legal. Among all the other complex problems of the revolution, *A Tale of Two Cities* poses the question of coding, secrecy and writing in the revolutionary context.

As the beginning to the novel makes clear, past and present are alike. Dickens's historical fiction, then, is also trying to address contemporary fears, most powerfully the fear of urban chaos. The most prominent of the Jurors in Dickens's Tribunal — who are "the lowest, cruellest and worst populace of [the] city" (311) — is Jacques Three, but one of the inmates of the district of Saint Antoine, so often in the scenes of Revolutionary upheaval presented as a single, composite human-monster: "The hour was come, when Saint Antoine was to execute his horrible idea of hoisting up men for lamps to show what he could be and do" (249). Later, the Tribunal and the Guillotine take over the roles of judge and executioner, but this means that they are simply extensions of the fury of Saint Antoine, staffed by the same people and motivated by the same hatreds. Even with its chronologically and geographically distant setting, the novel is also applicable to the mysterious boundaries of Dickens's own society. Just as the French system led inevitably to a bloody Revolution, so was it possible that modern social injustices could lead to a similar disaster. This possibility haunted Dickens's imagination throughout all of his social novels, and is evident in the work of the gnawing rats of *Little Dorrit* (208) and the "Spontaneous Combustion" that is Krook's fate, and by implication the fate of all corrupt institutions, in *Bleak House* (512). Yet the courts and the narrative itself, seeking to break into the secrets contained within society, found their own practices to be destructive. As the mystery narrative explored this possibility, it struck an internal conundrum. Can the narrative overcome the apparent analogy between its own uncovering practices and the violent invasions of the Revolution?

Dickens often projected in his writing some form of what Audrey Jaffe has called his "Asmodean fantasy."[7] This fantasy might be referred to a certain imaginative power, that of being able to inhabit or oversee the space of the home, to peer into it, observing yet unobserved. As Jaffe writes, "Asmodeus, [a demon] who could fly above houses yet remain invisible to their inhabitants, was Dickens's model for the semi-omniscient' (his phrase) presence behind *Household Words*, and persists as a narratorial model throughout Dickens's work" (95). This fantasy has a kind of resonance with the police, with their powers to enter and report, and, as we will see, the visual comprehensiveness of Inspector Bucket. How can this imagined power of being able to peer at will into the home and correct the wrongs found there be reconciled with Dickens's condemnation of the Revolutionary dictate of affixing the names of the occupants of the house to the front door, textualising and defining the inhabitants? What power does narrative have over the secrets of the city and its clustering houses? If we are sympathetically outraged by the invasion of Doctor Manette's privacy in the reading of his testimony before the Parisian court, we cannot then suspend that sympathy when the narrator's eye just as calmly invades the Manette home in London. Dickens seems to try and distance the Manette home by making it a quiet corner of a quiet suburb, but this isolation is incomplete, as the streets around the house echo with the footsteps of Revolutionary scenes in Paris. More widely, if our impulse in reading *A Tale of Two Cities* has been to get to the base of Manette's secret, how are we to be reconciled with this disastrous reversal?

When the reader follows Defarge in the storming of the Bastille we are drawn into the most powerful and energetic representation of the Revolution. Striking against the emblem and the substance of secrecy and oppression, Defarge at this point is a positive seeker after truth, if merely in the intensity of the search. He appears, in some way, to faithfully conclude in the cell the transaction begun when Manette was first recalled to life, searching for and uncovering the buried writing which is the last clue in

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7. See Jaffe for her use of this term in a reading of *Our Mutual Friend* and Gallagher 126, for an application of this fantasy to *A Tale of Two Cities*.

the story. Defarge finds the testimonial of the prisoner that not even Jarvis Lorry can draw out at first. Yet Defarge's discovery falls into the hands of Madame Defarge, and becomes an instrument not of freedom but of further entrapment, so that no matter how we read, we always find our way back into the prison and not away from it.

Madame Defarge, of course, keeps her own record of the past, not merely in the memory of the death of her sister, but more famously in her knitting. Like a dark precursor to Estella's knitting of a skein of clues, Madame Defarge knits together accusations and memory, encoding and entrapping the past. Her memory contains and defines those same accusations made by Dr Manette, and others besides, translated into an encrypted network. But, where Estella is unconscious of the significance of her knitting, expressing rather than creating Fate, Madame Defarge consciously designs the pattern of her knitting in order to make herself Nemesis, an agent of Fate. As the covert language of an oppressed people, Madame Defarge's coding in threads is a kind of dialect. Like the gesture of the rose, it is not public language but hidden, a language that resists the intrusions of state operated spies. Madame Defarge writes for the district of Saint Antoine in her knitting, representing its communal wrongs and desires through her cyphering. As secretive communication it parodies the communal function of speech, even more so when it is hinted, by Defarge, that the knitting is merely an ideolect, a system of signs known only to Madame Defarge and hence interpreted only by her: "'if madame my wife undertook to keep the register in her memory alone, she would not lose a word of it — not a syllable of it. Knitted, in her *own* stitches and her *own* symbols, it will always be as plain to her as the sun'" (202, emphasis added). But, by subsuming the processes of public memory to her own mind, by making the secrets of her past the contents of the register of the Revolution, Madame Defarge irrevocably binds herself to a dead past, effectually locking her personal memory into a communal grievance, fixed, immutable and terrible.

A secretive character herself, she exists at the common Dickensian nexus of power and knowledge, elevated by her memory and yet profoundly limited in the

iteration of the past. Madame Defarge is no Jaggers, but she resembles him in the sense that through her register of condemned names and her central role in the revolutionary movement she knows more about her environment, politically and socially, than anyone else. Her use of that knowledge enables her to preside over the quarter of Saint Antoine from her centralised wine-shop. At the same time, the symbols within her knitting cannot be altered or erased: "'It would be easier for the weakest poltroon that lives, to erase himself from existence, than to erase one letter of his names or crimes from the knitted register of Madame Defarge'" (302). She also resembles, then, Mrs Clennam; the ineradicable letters of the register are equivalent to the oblique D.N.F., both symbols of transgression and judgement with one vengeful keeper. Empowered by revenge, Madame Defarge is ultimately the tool and victim of revenge. Like Mrs Clennam, Madame Defarge's passion devolves into a radical immobility, a crippling fixation on the past. Their knowledge simultaneously empowers and condemns. For Madame Defarge, this means that memory becomes more important than lived experience.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the Revolutionary court when the reading of the written testimonial of Alexandre Manette is given precedence over the voice of the living man himself. This absolute detachment of testimony from context arises, as Dickens says, out of a lack of sympathy, out of a misapprehension of the human condition, and a sacreligious distortion of providential will. Madame Defarge is not a nihilist; she is an absolutist. Her resolute and unmovable qualities, reminiscent of Mrs Clennam's stoniness, are continually stressed — she is "one quite steady figure.... immovable" (249) — as is her identification of the Revolution with catastrophic natural forces — "'tell Wind and Fire where to stop... but don't tell me'" (370). For the Revolutionary catastrophe is not conceived of purely in terms of natural disaster but as apocalypse — the Revolution propels human society into a region beyond time, in which all identities obtaining up to that point become fixed and immutable. As Glancy points out, heredity is as important to Madame Defarge as it is to any aristocrat (70).

To her blood, and the inherited stains of blood, are absolute. And where Manette's testimony condemns the Evremond line "to the times when all these things shall be answered for" implying the Last Judgement as well as the Revolution, the assumption of the Revolution is that it *is* the Last Judgement, a secular Armageddon. Where judgement is set within the realm of providence the revolutionaries, like the aristocrats before them, presume to act on behalf of providence, abrogating to themselves the powers of judgement that are properly reserved only for the deity. Preferring to speak in the mode of timeless, fixed signs and codes rather than from the mode of human time and voice, the Revolution disastrously re-reads itself back into an oppressive history.

Madame Defarge's inflexibility paradoxically obscures the function of time, and obliterates the true relationships between words and events, people and things, life and death. Aspiring to an apocalyptic finality, a secular day of judgement, preferring the voice of the dead past to living testimony, the Revolution inverts the relationship between the living and the dead, turns the living world into a kind of Hades, and corrupts the movement of providence. Living human beings become ghosts, imprisoned in a secular purgatory, as in the chilling scene when Darnay enters a chamber in La Force and encounters

> a company of the dead. Ghosts all! The ghost of beauty, the ghost of stateliness, the ghost of elegance, the ghost of pride, the ghost of frivolity, the ghost of wit, the ghost of youth, the ghost of age, all waiting their dismissal from the desolate shore, all turning on him the eyes that were changed by the death they had died in coming here. (285)

Here, the fixation with the past and the history of oppression reduces the revolutionary state to a state of death in life.

In this dislocated universe the dance of the Carmagnole represents the confusion that arises, as Dickens suggests, as "types of the distracted time" (308). In the dizzying, linked, random whirl of the dance individual identities and actions are submerged in mindless repetition, a repetition heightened in Dickens's description of the dance, verbs with ill-defined actants — "spun around, caught one another and spun around in pairs" (307) — in which all meaning is eventually displaced along the chain

of signifiers into meaninglessness. In its profoundest contradiction, the Revolutionary system perpetuates the abuses that it has risen against, reads itself back into the history it tries to transcend yet cannot forget, exaggerating the mechanics of prisons, arrest, spying, denunciation and arbitrary violence.

Dickens witnesses and personalises this through the mystery plot: the reading of Doctor Manette's old wrongs does not expiate the crimes against him but renews them. The spies and denouncements of the old system propagate through into the new. The personal crimes committed against Manette, and their consequences, become themselves a kind of allegory for the national crimes committed before the Revolution, and the self-destructive retribution of the Revolution. Dickens is explicit in his causal metaphor of the relationship between *régime* and Revolution: the one is organically the creation of the other, inevitable in the medium of time.

> All the devouring and insatiate Monsters imagined since imagination could record itself, are fused in the one realisation, Guillotine. And yet there is not in France, with its rich variety of soil and climate, a blade, a leaf, a root, a sprig, a peppercorn, which will grow to maturity under conditions more certain than those that have produced this horror. (399)

There is no mystery to this, and yet it becomes the mystery of the Revolutionary court precisely because this is what the court cannot recognise in itself, just as Madame Defarge cannot see her own monstrous and dehumanising lack of pity. The Revolutionary Tribunal, through the Guillotine, exercises its extreme sanction on the human body, destroying it in the process of publicising its innermost secrets. Mystery, taken to its extreme in the revolutionary tribunal, seems to question its own processes; the invasive narratological technique that the courts represent is reflected in Dickens's own Asmodean fantasy. The text cannot retire from this enigma, but finds a way to re-articulate it. Under the stresses of revolutionary action, a counterplot, a reaction within a revolution, is formed.

5.4. Counterplotting the Mystery.

Dickens does not terminate his plot with the end of Manette's mystery. Where the Revolutionary court is exposed by the narrative as itself incapable of making a substantive break with the past, the narrative must go beyond the court and the articulation of its mysteries to create a new, transcendent and resolving mystery. As Madame Defarge suspects Lucie Manette of plotting with the prisoner, *A Tale of Two Cities* must also form its own counterplot. The final agent of plot in *A Tale of Two Cities* is Sydney Carton, who takes over from Dr Manette as the saviour of Charles Darnay, completing the sequence that began with Jarvis Lorry's rescue of Manette. An Englishman who has no historical links to France, yet a close knowledge of Paris, his secrets are not opened up by the Revolutionary court. Sydney Carton is free to assert a new form of mastery, to rehabilitate interior secrecy, and to attempt a positive form of resurrection through sacrifice that seeks to transform and rehumanise the excesses of the Revolution.

Unlike Doctor Manette, whose past comes to be openly read and therefore known through the text of *A Tale of Two Cities*, Sydney Carton remains a mystery. We can only guess at the reasons for his spiritual emptiness, his lack of energy and application, his acquiescence to the secondary role of the Jackal to Stryver's Lion. His interior dynamic is dominated by "waste forces" (121), the nature of which Dickens hints at but never elucidates. Carton combines an almost Steerforthian lack of application with the indolence of Eugene Wrayburn, and like Wrayburn his inner life and potential are an enigma. A glimpse of his youth — "'the old seesaw Sydney. Up one minute and down the next, now in spirits and now in despondency!'" (120) — suggests to a modern reading the cycles of manic-depressive disorder, but Dickens has the character evade explanation, maintaining the secret of personality: "'God knows. It was my way, I suppose'" (120). Carton's contradictions are not analysed, opened up, or read by the text; his failures are outlined but not explained, as a "man of good

abilities and good emotions, incapable of their directed exercise, incapable of his own happiness, sensible of the blight on him, and resigning himself to let it eat him away" (122). There is no cause for this, merely incapability, and so, unlike Doctor Manette, Carton's inner self continues to be a secret.

Inwardness marks a possible point of resistance against the Revolution. Surrounded by the triumphant crowd after his release, Charles Darnay turns Lucie towards him at the same moment as the dance of the Carmagnole is taken up: "As he held her to his heart and turned her beautiful head between his face and the brawling crowd, so that his tears and her lips might come together unseen, a few of the people fell to dancing" (315). The private interior gesture becomes a barrier against the wild energies of the mob. Darnay's shifting of Lucie's attention towards a self-defined interior space recreates a point of resistance, a domestic interval where they are "unseen" in an intimate embrace. Privacy, the inner gesture, marks a boundary against the collective fury of the "brawling crowd" as represented in their dance. This inwardness resembles Manette's own interior secrecy, the concealment of himself within the Shoemaker, and the hidden writing of the unknown prisoner referred to by Darnay (131). In both cases the subject creates a private space of protected selfhood. We are aware of its vulnerability, that the household or the mind, though sacred, is not inviolable, but this gesture is subject to the fury of the Revolution simply because it threatens the security of the Revolution, as Darnay and Lucie are accused of plotting because they signal each other through the prison window. The only safe secrecy, however, is that transcendant, secure inwardness which Sydney Carton is able to assert.

Carton, through the exercise of secrecy, through the maintenance of a constituted secret self, is able to temporarily master the powers of the Revolution. In the inverted moral universe of the Terror, spies proliferate, but Carton re-inverts this order. He threatens the spy, Barsad, with the very sort of denunciation in which Barsad is practised. In the world of the Revolution such threats are enabled; it is the

atmosphere of secrecy and crime that allows Carton to find a purchase for his plans. By reducing human life to a desperate game, the Revolution is opened to a gamer with nothing to lose, and Carton has nothing to lose because of his secret love for Lucie. Barsad is even more vulnerable than Carton imagines due to his immersion in the corrupt deployment of secrets: "Besides that all secret men were soon terrified, here were surely cards enough of one black suit" (331). Barsad, however, is a different kind of secret man from Carton — "who was a mystery to wiser and honester man than he" (332) — precisely because he, Barsad, is neither wise nor honest, but ultimately a victim of the secrecy that he purports to deal with and abuses as spy and informer.

Carton, then, asserts an exemplary mastery of mystery. He is able to plan, to plot, and therefore create a new narrative, a counter-plot, that resists and subverts the self-referential, destructive narration of the revolution. He lays his ground carefully, by purchasing a soporific and securing Barsad's assistance, and then takes to roaming the city of Paris rather as his creator, Dickens, roamed the streets of London. Thus, Carton takes command of the city he is shown to know well. Carton is able to move at will through Paris, and later even enters the dangerous district of Saint Antoine. In the Defarges' wineshop, a private spy, he hears the last link in the narrative of Madame Defarge, and learns of the imminent danger that threatens Lucie and her child. Like the narrator, Carton shares the anticipation of the end of narrative, the termination of the plot: "the settled manner of a tired man, who had wandered and struggled and got lost, but who at length struck into his road, and saw its end" (342). This vision of ending is like the quiet that follows the proper ending of plot after its discursive journeys. Creating his counterplot, Carton is able to recreate narrative. Carton's new plot will unravel the effects of the story drawn out of Doctor Manette, and transform vengeance into redemption.

As Carton views the lighted windows of the city he feels "a solemn interest in the whole life and death of the city" (343). Thus, we are reconnected with the

narrator's "solemn consideration when I enter a great city at night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secrets" (44). The secretive Carton recreates a new imaginative space, an inviolate city that rehabilitates for the reader those private spaces so destructively invaded by the fury of the Revolution. Though Carton engages in a profound sympathetic communion with the city, he is unwilling to break into it entirely, to destroy its integrity. At the end of his vigil we see all of Paris brought into the realm of death, which we have understood as the ultimate domain of Revolutionary absolutism: "Then, the night, with the moon and the stars, turned pale and died, and for a little while it seemed as if Creation were delivered over to Death's dominion" (343). Death, of course, is that secret realm from which secrecy derives part of its awful terrors, but beyond death lies life: "the glorious sun, rising, seemed to strike these words [of the Resurrection], that burden of the night, straight and warm to his heart in its long bright rays" (344). To narrate and understand the city as Carton does is to accept the element of time, finality and mystery in narrative, and thus the end and limits of narrative. In this way he evades the destructive reiteration of the past inherent in the revolutionary mode of narrative, and though he enters into a profound, humanistic interest in the secrets behind darkened windows, Carton is content to allow the mystery to retain its mystery, to reconstitute mystery through a humane mode of imagination.

A Tale of Two Cities highlights the contradictions of the Revolution through narrative, and is therefore subject to an internal tension between modes of narrative. One mode, revolutionary narrative, expressed through the power of the Tribunal, breaks down and obliterates secrecy and ultimately dissects the individual through the extreme violence of the state. By obliterating mystery, and by fixing and determining mystery, this mode of narrative becomes sterile and destructive, the vicious, inflexible coding of the knitting women. Dickens's narrative must therefore reconstitute narrative, create its own counterplot that begins with the internal, private gesture, a personal mystery. Thus, as Doctor Manette tells Darnay, "mysteries arise out of close

love, as well as wide divisions; in the former case they are subtle and delicate, and difficult to penetrate'" (165). Mysteries of love enter a contest against the intrusive state. Dickens's Asmodean fantasy can be disconnected from state surveillance and spying once we undertand that this fantasy is informed by Carton's "solemn interest in the whole life and death of the city" (343), an interest that is imaginative and compassionate, drawn towards secrecy yet still able to conceive of a separation between observer and subject. Carton's privacy and secrecy create a zone of action in which the state cannot intrude.

Carton acts out the drama of his impossible love for Lucie Manette in his self-sacrifice. His love for her, and his promise, is, of course, a secret; "'the secret is yours, not mine; and I promise to respect it,'" (182) she tells him. Darnay, when he is first imprisoned, is kept in secret (284). Carton substitutes himself for Darnay, substitutes his secret identity and passion for the secret kept by the state, and in this manner subverts the state. New secrets develop as points of intercession beyond the surveillance of the prison. Darnay is an unsatisfactory hero because, as a good man, he has few secrets, and his worst secret, his family association, is destroyed by the Tribunal. In his stead comes the secretive Carton. By taking his place, Carton effects not only the redemptive substitution of Christ's sacrifice but also a personal act of substitution. Only by dying in the place of Charles Darnay can he become the person beloved by Lucie. The ambiguity of his exchange with Lorry — "'Yes, He will perish: there is no real hope'" (367) — or the openness of the formula, "'A life you love'" (366), indicates that in some way Carton seeks a final merging with his double. Thus, Carton, the secular man, effects another substitution by playing out the drama of his personal passion in imitation of Christ's Passion. By inserting himself into the vengeance of the Tribunal he can briefly assume the name and the place of the man who is loved by the only woman he has ever loved. This is not to say that Carton attempts to erase Charles Darnay and to usurp his place. Instead, by accepting the closure of his

personal narrative through substitution, Carton enables a new and positive narrative. Only in the death of one story are new stories possible.

Carton undertakes a personal sacrifice to enable new stories, new narratives. These stories are always renewed, passed on from generation to generation:

> It was remembered afterward that when he bent down and touched her face with his lips, he muttered some words. The child who was nearest to him, told them afterwards, and told her grand-children when she was a handsome old lady, that she heard him say, 'A life you love.' (366)

One of Dickens's test titles for *A Tale of Two Cities* was *Memory Carton* (*Memoranda* 5.22), indicating that the character was seen to be reconstructed in memory, remade through story-telling. Carton seeds the substitution of a redemptive narrative for the self-consuming destructive narratives of the Revolution. Though Carton, in death, aspires to a super-human timelessness, his own narrative, in the medium of time, brings about a transformation, a break with the past. Carton's final words, though melodramatic in presentation, are moving in part because they are merely speculative, a submerged, unheard, secret prophecy of that which only might be, yet retrospectively contains its own retelling and transformation:

> I see him, foremost of just judges and honoured men, bringing a boy of my name, with a forehead that I know and golden hair, to this place — then fair to look upon, with not a trace of this day's disfigurement — and I hear him tell the child my story, with a tender and a faltering voice. (404)

The judicial voice becomes tender, faltering and personal in a setting cleansed of violence. Foretelling the future in the act of reading the past, Carton is able to reconcile the processes of mystery and narrative. Though the Tribunal enacts the process of narrative and mystery, its ultimate aim is silence, conclusiveness, something fixed and irrevocable and therefore contrary to narrative. Thus, narrative is abhorrent, ultimately, to the revolution. The Little Seamstress is executed because she is accused of "plots" (384). Sydney Carton also dies because he has plotted, but his counterplot is redemptive of both narrative and mystery.

5.5. A Tale of Two Mysteries.

Dickens chose to unfold his historical novel through the medium of plot rather than character. His characters would be developed through their actions rather than the more "Dickensian" methods of description, verbal quirks and mannerism. We have seen, from *Edwin Drood* through *Our Mutual Friend* to *Great Expectations*, how Dickens used the techniques of the mystery narrative to orientate and drive his plots, how the rhetoric of mystery is bound up in his artistic processes. Thus, *A Tale of Two Cities* also begins with a mystery and carries some of the trappings of mystery — secrets, courts, guilt, obscure and catastrophic pasts. The first mysteries of *A Tale of Two Cities* are the secrets of the human mind located with Alexandre Manette. The story of his wrongs, as Dickens carefully lays the ground of his psychological state and then brings it out, becomes in miniature the emergent story of the abuses that led to the Revolution. Yet Dickens adds a twist to this as severe as any reversal in a detective novel, and even more problematic, for the narrative impulse to uncover secrets becomes the inquisitorial impulse of the Revolutionary Tribunal, which in turn leads to a disastrous invasion of the privacy of the subject, an inversion and corruption of knowledge into a force for death and political revenge. Dickens's mystery story, then, highlights the internal contradictions of the Revolution, exposing its causes while showing that the Revolution itself fails by becoming mindlessly attached to its own wrongs, ruthless in its pursuit of absolute security. In her knitting Madame Defarge expresses and contains all the wrongs of her urban setting, Saint Antoine, but when the Revolution wracks Paris, and finds its culmination in the decoding of that knitting into lists of the condemned, the Revolution is seen to devour itself. The Tribunal, a theatre for the city, foregrounds its own contradictions when Manette's mystery is cruelly exposed. A second mystery must take its place, for while fiction narrates mystery, to utterly obliterate mystery is to bring about an end of process, an end of the natural, sympathetic world, an apocalyptic confusion towards which only the fanatic aspires.

Sydney Carton can reassert mystery, and a kind of mastery, out of the secrets of his own unreadable heart. His respect for human integrity allows him to re-read and negotiate the city humanely, sharing in the narrator's abiding interest in its secrets while refraining from invading its privacy. His redemptive sacrifice allows a repositioning of the secret, personal and protected human heart in the centre of the ritual executions of the Revolution. Through his sacrifice and through his prophecy, Sydney Carton enables new narratives, new mysteries, new secrets, new stories, whereas the Revolution seeks the obliteration of story in the enactment of immutable, coded punishments. We are, indeed, each one of us, secrets of solemn interest. Stripped of our outward trappings, we appear on the scaffold as questionable, doomed, weak things, "children of the Universal Mother" (402), but within this we conceal another identity, a Mystery of Mysteries.

6. Passages in the Labyrinth of *Little Dorrit.*

'You speak so mysteriously,'

— Mrs Clennam (87).

'[As] a tool against reductionism [hypertext] could be of particular value in coming to terms with an author as anarchic, unpredictable and residually mysterious as Dickens.'

— Sutherland (308).

6.1. A Maze, a Mystery, and some Initiates.

There is a tradition of labyrinthine imagery in our criticism of Dickens. We speak of his novels as mazes, responding to their complexity, their sprawling extents and, not the least, their capacity to baffle. The maze is already a point of connection with the discussion of *Our Mutual Friend* and *Great Expectations*, and will reappear in *Bleak House*. In the longer novels of Dickens's maturity, *Bleak House*,*Little Dorrit* and *Our Mutual Friend*, this structural analogue helps to describe novels that are to the reader terrific mazes of plot, character and setting. We can speak, furthermore, of the multi-plot novel and its strands, or other patterns of hidden connectivity, such as the analogical structure of *Our Mutual Friend* or the skein of clues in *Great Expectations*. The notion of the hypertext, from modern computing and information systems, can be deployed at this point to provide a general structure with which to elucidate these various maze-like formations. Because the maze is misleading, confusing, constituted of an invisible network, we assume that it has a secret, a hidden pathway, and therefore the labyrinth is already associated for us with mystery, while its discursive meanderings have some coherence with the dilatory territory of the enigmatic text. In Dickens, the city itself, as a vast concordance of streets and rooms, courtyards and prisons, constitutes the urban labyrinth. The dense site of conjunction between these two ideas is the narrative of urban mystery. Narrative invites and drives reading, and in the narrative of urban mystery, reading necessarily resembles detection. In *Little Dorrit*, the city and its prisons enfold and contain their secrets, and we cannot forget

that the original labyrinth, designed by Daedalus the artificer, was a place of imprisonment and concealment[47]. Imprisonment of all kinds is shaped and determined by secrecy and enigmas. Thus characters like Arthur Clennam act as acolyte detectives, seeking to reconstruct and comprehend the hidden nature of their world, and in Arthur Clennam's case, locate and expiate an originating familial guilt. The aim is mastery of many unknowns, but several characters pre-empt and conceal these secrets, asserting and constructing their personal mastery. They are initiates in Dickens's world, but the knowledge they protect is so multifarious and unstable that knowledge itself becomes both necessary and destructive, both empowerment and entrapment. Mrs Clennam is at once the self-appointed priestess of her own vicious faith and the prisoner of her life-long secrecy, just as Mr Merdle is at once a powerful financier and fraudster. Arthur Clennam, seeking some pattern and restitution, risks obliteration in the encounter with such dangerous, yet potentially liberating, knowledge. *Little Dorrit*, developing its narrative of the prison, mystery and initiates, weaves itself about these complexities but refuses to allow of their reduction.

6.2. "They came into a maze of dust..."

It is not uncommon to find*Little Dorrit* discussed in terms of the maze or labyrinth. Elaine Showalter speaks broadly of the novel's "pensive imagery of labyrinths and prisons" (20). J. Hillis Miller devotes part of his discussion in *Dickens: The World of his Novels*, to the labyrinth imagery of *Little Dorrit* (232-6). One cannot necessarily appeal to the imagery of the maze to make an argument for a maze-like structure, but the persistence of labyrinth imagery does point to the associated complexity of structure, to the involuted, self-referential and sometimes confusing construction of *Little Dorrit*. As Kathryn Sutherland argues, in her evocatively titled paper "A Guide Through the Labyrinth: Dickens's *Little Dorrit* as Hypertext," in*Little*

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47. For a brief recounting of the legend of the Cretan Labyrinth see Doob 11-13.

Dorrit the reader's potential confusion stems from the "maze of information and the speed of narrative shifts" (306). As part of a project that would both represent and to some degree reduce this potential confusion, Sutherland discusses the possibility of configuring*Little Dorrit* as a hypertext. Hypertext is the term given to a system of electronically linked texts (Sutherland 305). Such a system is constructed not linearly, but of *nodes* and *links*, where nodes represent the units of information (or blocks of text) and links form the connections between nodes. Since links can be developed in multiple directions between any nodes, the hypertext can be thought of as a web of interconnections, creating a medium that enables the reader to be immersed within the text and to navigate non-sequentially throughout the text. Thus, the hypertext can give us an idea of how certain patterns of connection can exist in a non-linear fashion within a linear text. The idea of a hypertext, and its nodes and links as represented through an information system, gives us an opportunity to account more clearly for the labyrinthine structure of a Dickens novel such as*Little Dorrit.*

As Sutherland points out, the most common metaphor for the hypertext is the web[48]. The web itself is analogous to Dickens's own metaphor for his writing as weaving (which can itself be thought of as composing nodes and links), in which the writer maintains "the relationship of its finer threads to the whole pattern, which is always before the eyes of the story-weaver at his loom" (Postscript to *Our Mutual Friend*, 893). Threads, in turn, remind us of the strands of the muti-plot novel or the skein of interconnected clues I have posited for *Great Expectations*, or the analogical structure that lies alongside the plot of *Our Mutual Friend.* All of these accounts — multiplot novel, analogical structure, strands and weaving — can be expressed by the nodes and links of the hypertext. They are all viable descriptions because they conceive of non-linear connections. Indeed, none of these representations are incompatible. And, since nodes and links, though they have no fixed spatial dimensions within a computer's memory, can be diagramatised within spatial dimensions, the hypertext also

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[48]. On the internet, the most popular current medium is the World Wide Web, supported by a scripting tool known as HTML, or Hyper-Text Markup Language.

gives us an appropriate structure with which to envisage the labyrinth, which in plan is nothing other than a texture of locations (nodes) and paths between locations (links). Considering the hypertext allows us to see exactly how the linear text strikes us, in reading, as a labyrinth of many potential routes. This is not to argue that Dickens's text *is* a hypertext, but the ease with which it could be adapted to such a medium emphasises the way that the various forms of interconnectivity, through plot, analogies, or clues, all contribute to the notion of the text as maze. Dickens's text remains linear in its expression, but because the text encourages us to imagine connections, likenesses, resonances and hidden structures, the curious accumulation of impressions that makes up the reading experience leads us to recall and interpret the novel as a hypertext.

Linkages and intersections in space and time inform *Little Dorrit* from very early on. Miss Wade observes that, "'In our course through life we shall meet the people who are coming to meet *us*, from many strange places and by many strange roads'" (63). This formulation is adapted and reaffirmed by the end of the chapter:

> And thus, by day and night, under the sun and under the stars, climbing the dusty hills and toiling along the weary plains, journeying by land and journeying by sea, coming and going so strangely, to meet and to act and react on one another, move all we restless travellers through the pilgrimage of life. (67)

The trope of a pilgrimage along roads, with their strange turns and unexpected meetings, resembles the journey through a maze. Journeying, coincidences, intersections: they are more than a metaphor for *Little Dorrit*. They reflect part of the construction of the plot of the novel, a consistent pattern of movement and intersection that resembles motion within the maze. Characters meet by chance and meet again by chance in countless permutations. Clennam meets with the Meagles abroad, the Dorrits in London. Later, the Dorrits meet with Minnie Gowan, the Meagles's daughter. Rigaud is with them, yet Rigaud maintains an almost fantastic mobility in order to connnect with so many other participants in the plot. Movement reproduces the inflections of a plot that ranges widely across space, from France, to London, to Venice and Rome and the European Alps. Characters meet or encounter each other constantly

by coincidence, as Clennam runs into Meagles and Doyce at the Circumlocution Office, or crosses the path of Miss Wade. Their meetings mark points of action and transformation in the plot — every encounter has its subsidiary effect. These unanticipated encounters shape the turns and reversals of the plot:

> Which of the vast multitude of travellers, under the sun and the stars, climbing the dusty hills and toiling along the weary plains, journeying by land and sea, coming and going so strangely, to meet and to act and react on one another; which of the host may with no suspicion of the journey's end, be travelling surely hither? (221)

The question itself denominates the construction of the novel. These labyrinthine crossings suggest a labyrinthine plot, a plot which navigates complex switches between persons and places.

A plot which is a labyrinth suggests another labyrinthine structure of analogues and resemblances. Arthur Clennam's phrase is "'this labyrinth of a world'" (57), and the novel itself traces the "the multiplicity of paths in the labyrinth trodden by the sons of Adam" (611). The theatre where Fanny dances is possibly a *theatrum mundi* for the lower world: "a maze of dust, where a quantity of people were tumbling over one another, and there was such a confusion of unaccountable shapes of beams, bulkheads, brickwalls, ropes and rollers, and such a mixture of gaslight and daylight, that they seemed to have got on the wrong side of the pattern of the universe" (279). Spaces themselves and their inhabitants become analogical inflections of each other. Bleeding Heart Yard, "inhabited by poor people, who set up their rest among its faded glories, as Arabs of the desert pitch their tents among the fallen stones of the Pyramids" (176), resembles Hampton Court where "the venerable inhabitants of that venerable pile seemed, in those times, to be encamped like a sort of civilised gipsies" (359). Spatially distinct, they are analogically similar, linked like nodes in the hypertext. All of these locations are organised by Dickens's overarching analogy, that of "the prison of this lower world" (831). The entirety of Dickens's vision is hypertextually linked through representations of the prison. As the prisoners of the Marshalsea, through their petty ceremoniousness, recreate society in debtor's gaol, so Little Dorrit observes that society itself is a type of the Marshalsea:

> It appeared on the whole, to Little Dorrit, that this same society in which they lived, greatly resembled a superior sort of Marshalsea. Numbers of people seemed to come abroad, pretty much as people had come into the prison; through debt, through idleness, relationship, curiosity, and general unfitness for getting on at home. (565)

At its most immanent, the prison is nothing less than the one inescapable reality within the labyrinth of appearances. Thus Little Dorrit, while travelling the Italian landscape, finds "the opening of that beautiful land as the rugged mountain chasm widened and let them out from a gloomy and dark imprisonment — all a dream — only the old, mean Marshalsea a reality" (517). All these analogies link spaces in a non-linear fashion, creating a hypertextual labyrinth in which characters move and yet maintain a curious kind of stasis.

This might imply that the labyrinth has no centre, or that the centre is everywhere because every vantage point appears to reproduce the same confusing perspective. Yet the labyrinth story is also one of approach towards the centre of the labyrinth, where the Minotaur, the creature which the labyrinth was built to conceal and confine, lurks. This tension between aimlessness and direction, centre and non-centrality, is evident in the distinction Dood makes between unicursal and multicursal labyrinths (5), that is, between single path progressive labyrinths, as exemplified by the spiral maze, and multiple path labyrinths. Now, the text is also unicursal, in the sense that we read linearly from beginning to end, and multicursal in the hypertextual sense outlined above. Characters and readers, then, can approach certain sites that are conceived of as centres, and these include any symbolic or actual incarnation of the prison, the Marshalsea itself, the Circumlocution Office or the Clennam house, as later discussion will show. None of these sites, however, can be construed as the absolute centre, the core of the labyrinth itself against which all other points are peripheral. What they are is dense nodes of reference, the points where the hypertextual links tend to focus, and as such they can be either a powerful symbol, such as the prison, or a spatial locale, such as the Clennam house (though of course, a spatial location in a text can itself be a symbol). Naturally, these sites themselves are densely linked — they tend to resemble each other precisely because that is their nature. Thus, reading can

guide us towards certain points that we can think of as centres, and these are the only points where we can hope to meet the Minotaur, since the story always places it there, but we are still conscious that our centre may itself be the image of another place, the reiteration of the endless paths of the labyrinth.

In the opening to the third chapter of *Little Dorrit*, the spacious imagery of journeys by hill and plain of the preceding chapter is abruptly replaced by the "gloomy, close, and stale" (67) streets of London, where Arthur Clennam arrives from his own long trip home. In London "strange roads" become ugly and relentless thoroughfares and alleys: "Nothing to see but streets, streets, streets. Nothing to breathe but streets, streets, streets" (68). The locus of movement and travel thus becomes both urban and labyrinthine, a universe of possibility shrunk to the vista of endless streets. The novel that begins with the idea of journeying and intersection, of travellers moving towards unknown destinations, comes to represent and enclose its own mazes within the city. As we have seen through the analogical structure, all points eventually refer back to themselves, and the prison. In the maze motion is possible but redundant, since the maze is constructed to retard progress, to arrest movement. A maze is navigable only if it is understood, and thus its power as prison and place of detainment is dependent on its complexity, the fact that its design is unknown. Thus, to the Father of the Marshalsea the reasons for his imprisonment are a mystery:

> The affairs of this debtor were perplexed by a partnership, of which he knew no more than that he had invested money in it; by legal matters of assignment and settlement, conveyance here and conveyance there, suspicion of unlawful preference of creditors in this direction, and mysterious spiriting away of property in that; and as nobody on the face of the earth could be more incapable of explaining any single item in the heap of confusion than the debtor himself, nothing comprehensible could be made of his case. (99)

In the hypertextual world of*Little Dorrit* we find ourselves trapped in the urban labyrinth, inexplicable and terrifying, which contains, at its core, the prison. The idea of the prison, like a node in the hypertext, leads us through virtually endless links throughout the whole of the possible world that the novel depicts. Reflexivity and movement reinforce this condition. Imprisonment itself is our state of being in the world, confronted by its inexplicable facade, its illusions. Thus, imprisonment, the

labyrinth itself, is predicated on a mystery. Arthur Clennam returns to London to find a solution to the mystery he senses about himself, and his search leads him to the imprisoned William Dorrit. Urban mystery in *Little Dorrit* is constructed around the enigmatic family plot of the house of Clennam.

6.3. Speaking of Mystery.

The Gothic plot of the Clennam household focuses our attention on the mysteries of Dickens's city. The city itself is presented in many ways as a mysterious entity. In the first place we have seen how many of its locations — Hampton Court, the environs of Bleeding Heart Yard, the theatre where Fanny dances — resemble labyrinths. Through Little Dorrit's eyes, we observe the city as a place of mystery and confusion: "teeming ideas of Covent Garden as a place of past and present mystery, romance, abundance, want, beauty, ugliness, fair country gardens, and foul street gutters" (208). Behind the city's romanticised mystery, then, lurks the enigma of its poverty, its social neglect, "the shame, desertion, wretchedness, and exposure of the great capital" (220). At times London, like Venice and Rome, comes to resemble the ruined capital of some lost empire of unknown history, "waiting for some adventurous Belzoni to dig it out and discover its history" (70). The city is both ruin and prison, and the reasons for its state of decay are unknown, a secret. The administration of the nation and its capital, its internal economy, is in the hands of the Barnacles of the Circumlocution Office, a bureaucratic edifice devoted to its own opacity and inefficiency. It is in this city of unknown secrets and unknowable decay, that we begin to locate the mystery of the Clennam plot.

Arthur Clennam, approaching the old house, sees its environs in the grip of urban mystery:

> It always affected his imagination as wrathful, mysterious, and sad; and his imagination was sufficiently impressible to see the whole neighbourhood under some tinge of its dark shadow. As he went along, upon a dreary night, the dim streets by which he went, seemed all depositories of oppressive secrets. The deserted counting houses, with their secrets of books and papers locked up

> in chests and safes; the banking-houses, with their secrets of strong rooms and wells, the keys of which were in a very few secret pockets and in a very few secret breasts; the secrets of all the dispersed grinders in the vast mill, among whom there were doubtless plunderers, forgers, and trust-betrayers of many sorts, whom the light of any day that dawned might reveal; he could have fancied that these things, in hiding, imparted a heaviness to the air. The shadow thickening and thickening as he approached its source, he thought of the secrets of the lonely church-vaults, where the people who had hoarded and secreted in iron coffers were in their turn similarly hoarded, not yet at rest from doing harm; and then of the secrets of the river, as it rolled between two frowning wildernesses of secrets, extending, thick and dense, for many miles, and warding off the free air and the free country swept by winds and wings of birds. (596-7)

This is the key invocation of urban mystery in *Little Dorrit.* Mystery and secrecy are lodged in every aspect of Victorian social and commercial life. The streets themselves are "depositories of oppressive secrets," reminding us of the London streets first entered by Arthur in the third chapter, and the scenes of "guilt and misery" (217) of Little Dorrit's party. Secrecy persists in the counting houses and banks, the financial core of the city, universalised through the "dispersed grinders in the vast mill." Within these places of business and respectability lurk criminality, falsehood, forgery and betrayal. Again, we see an emphasis on books and papers, on the semiotic nature of this economy. Business conceals fraud and robbery: "plunderers, forgers, trust-betrayers of every sort" (196). The phrase suggests Mr Merdle and his vast financial swindling. Dickens's vision turns next to the churchyard, the indefeasible secrecy of death, but in the urban scene mystery has become almost entirely secularised — the mysteries of the tomb are not the rewards or punishments of the next world but the persistent wrongs that serve to work further evil in this world. This reminds us of the mystery that Arthur Clennam most fears, the unknown wrong that is his father's legacy to him, the suspicion of some trust betrayed. Finally, Dickens addresses the wider mysteries in which urban mystery is located, the mysteries of the river which is always Dickens's emblem of life and death. Life and death, however, are crushed between the urban mass, "two frowning wildernesses of secrets," imprisoned by being separated from the freedom of the country and the sky. The subliminal association of this passage is with the prison, not only in the imagery of locks, keys, oppression, darkness and hoarding, or the warding-off of the "free airs," but in the repetition of

"shadows" which in *Little Dorrit* are nothing less than the shadows of the Marshalsea, the image of all imprisonment, guilt and repression[49]. Thus, this passage on urban mystery subtly connects all the mysteries that arise in *Little Dorrit*: the secrets of the city, Merdle's fraud, the unknown wrong done by the house of Clennam, the vague suspicion of some unanswered act and the fear of imprisonment for some unrecoverable reason.

Everything turns, finally, on the Clennam house and its inmate:

> The shadow still darkening as he drew near the house, the melancholy room which his father had once occupied, haunted by the appealing face he himself had seen fade away with him when there was no other watcher by the bed, arose before his mind. Its close air was secret. The gloom, and must, and dust of the whole tenement, were secret. At the heart of it his mother presided... firmly holding all the secrets of her own and his father's life, and austerely opposing herself, front to front, to the great final secret of all life. (597)

The Clennam house, situated in the centre of its environment, comes to represent the mystery of the city. Like the firm of Dombey and Son, the House of Clennam is both a commercial venture and a family (no matter how disparate). It unites family and the activities of the city, representing the entirety of Victorian capitalist society. As Arthur Clennam, looking out at the neighbourhood houses, wonders "if the disembodied spirits of former inhabitants were ever conscious of them, how they must pity themselves for their old places of imprisonment" (70), we might surely apply the same speculation to his home, the most ruinous structure in a neighbourhood of ruins, the most haunted of the haunted houses. With no straight floors or fittings, where even the natural light of day is lost among vague and unnumbered rooms, the house resembles a labyrinth: "The furniture, at once spare and lumbering, hid in the rooms rather than furnished them, and there was no colour in all the house; such colour as had ever been there, had long ago started away on lost sunbeams.... There was not one straight floor from the foundation to the roof" (94). The Clennam house unites the themes of maze, prison, secrecy and mystery. In the ramshackle house, exploring the empty rooms, Arthur Clennam finds that the house is haunted by strange sounds, memories of

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[49]. Showalter writes extensively about the image of the shadow and its relationship to guilt, imprisonment, repression and doubling.

religious terror and punishment, accusatory and ghost-like portraits: "His [father's] picture, dark and gloomy, earnestly speechless on the wall, with the eyes intently looking at his son as they had looked when life departed from them, seemed to urge him awfully to the task he had attempted" (95).

The most mysterious of all the inhabitants of that house is its presiding genius, Mrs Clennam. Her secretiveness is absolute, even in simple human exchange: "Her severe face had no thread of relaxation in it, by which any explorer could have been guided into the gloomy labyrinth of her thoughts" (84). The whole world resides in this mental labyrinth, reduced, as she says, to the scale of the prison: "'the world has narrowed to these dimensions'" (73). As Arthur suspects, her self-imposed isolation is a penance for another imprisonment: "'He withers away in his prison; I wither away in mine; inexorable justice is done; what do I owe on this score!'" (129). Thus the Clennam house, within its single most impressive occupant, contains labyrinth, secret and mystery.

There is the process of substitution and secularisation at work here. The secular, urban mystery presented in *Little Dorrit* is by its nature diffuse and threatening. Dickens's narrative art discovers a way to enact mystery, to actualise the numinous in pragmatic difficulties. In the first case, the physical presence of the Clennam house localises urban mystery, presents it within a spatialised context that represents the fear and repression of the urban, its secretive counting houses, banks, streets and commercial ventures. We see how there is some mechanical mystery associated with the house of Clennam, the mystery that is no more explicit, to begin with, than Arthur Clennam's fears and suspicions. This mechanical mystery conceals, of course, a metaphysical mystery, a mystery that is predicated on imprisonment, and this deeper mystery initiates a new dispersal, for Arthur leaves his mother's house and pursues the name of Dorrit through the Circumlocution Office. Arthur's role as detective will be discussed in the next section. Here, my interest is in how the mystery that is first evident in the Clennam household undergoes another articulation, how it detours into the institution of the Circumlocution Office. Dickens's urban mystery once again

diffuses through this labyrinthine text, leading, as it were, from the home to the office, and demonstrating further the dislocations and dispersal of effect that we associate with secularised urban mystery.

Delay, nepotism, enigma, paperwork, administration: these concerns intersect in Dickens's depiction of the Circumlocution Office. In an urban world without a moral or religious centre, a totalising secular power is envisaged. It is an imaginary department, but it represents an entire structure of bureaucracy, the sense of an explosion of administrative bodies mobilised without context: "the most important Department under Government. No public business could be done at any time without the acquiescence of the Circumlocution Office" (145). The neglect of the Circumlocution Office is plainly its neglect of the city, its poverty and urban decay: "look to the rats, young and old, all ye Barnacles, for before God they are eating away our foundations, and will bring the roofs on our heads!" (208). Yet there is no corrective to this. Like the Court of Chancery, where the endless production of legal texts leads to inanity and stasis, the Circumlocution Office is a body devoted to delay, "HOW NOT TO DO IT" (145), to the prevention and absorption of positive action. And, like Chancery, the Circlumlocution Office has no clearly defined border, but extends its crippling influence far into society. Stasis and arrest are the conditions of imprisonment; the Circumlocution Office holds Mr Dorrit in debt, but since it cannot be forced to respond or divulge its interest, the debt cannot be removed. The practical Doyce has his invention suppressed, retarding the material progress of the nation. Yet inaction breeds a furious production of paperwork, "half a bushel of minutes, several sacks of official memoranda, and a family-vault full of ungrammatical correspondence" (145). Despite its incomprehension of the city, the Circumlocution Office produces signs, writing, verbiage, that aims not at comprehension but at incomprehension, muddle, inscrutability.

The title of the Office, then, is suggestive in its link between verbal disjunction and urban complexity. Of course, the place itself is architecturally incoherent: "For Mr Tite Barnacle, Mr Arthur Clennam made his fifth inquiry one day... having on previous

occasions awaited that gentleman successively in a hall, a glass case, a waiting room, and a fireproof passage" (148), but it is also verbally promiscuous (in the production of texts) and committed to no form of definitive utterance at all: "'The Circumlocution Office, sir... may possibly have recommended — possibly — I cannot say — that some public claim against the insolvent estate of a firm or co-partnership to which this person may have belonged, should be enforced'" (153). A maze of paperwork — "form-filling, corresponding, minuting, memorandum-making, signing, counter-signing, referring backwards and forwards, and referring sideways, crosswise and zig-zag" (571) — a veritable hypertext, oversees an urban maze. Circuity, then, of language and location is the key here, just as files, memoranda, the whole business of administration, are necessarily endlessly circulated throughout the Office. The result is opacity, indecipherable language, since nothing can be said or done definitively, and this suggests a further analogy between Circumlocution and the various modes of idiosyncratic speech found throughout the novel. From William Dorrit's voiced pauses to Flora Finching's ramblings, speech becomes impenetrable, coded, mysterious, constantly diverting and deferring meaning. Unsurprisingly, a meaningless comparison between paperwork and city streets is used by the "noble or right honourable Barnacle" (572) in defence of the Circumlocution Office before the House: "he derived from [a paper containing a few figures] the remarkable fact that the sheets of foolscap paper it had devoted to the public service would pave the footpath on both sides of Oxford Street from end to end, and leave nearly a quarter of a mile spare for the park" (572). But despite this explosion of communication, the Circumlocution Office is devoted to unreadability, secrecy, in which paperwork becomes its reason for existence and its defence, predicated on the one certainty that no one else is permitted to know: "'Look here. Upon my soul you mustn't come here saying you want to know, you know,'" (154). The Office produces signs in order to conceal information, displaces all efforts at interpretation into new demands for interpretation, in its very

generality slipping into the manifold gaps between modes of mastery, mediating without ever preferring any method of advance[50]. Urban mystery is dispersed through the Circumlocution Office, the ur-bureaucracy, and its opacity, its production of paperwork and its stasis represent the diffuse experience of urban mystery.

6.4. The Acolyte Detective in *Little Dorrit.*

Arthur Clennam's refrain in the Circumlocution Office, "'I want to know'" (154), enunciates a central concern of the novel. As the novelistic imagination categorises, describes, and posits relationships, it can do nothing other than engage in this will to knowledge. Readers and characters share the same challenges, though at different levels of interpretation, in a novel in which the detection, interpretation and meandering of characters within the possible world delineated by the text is a way of modelling the reader's own interpretative process within an imagined hypertext. There are mysteries which, if solved, we believe will show us a truth of a different, metaphysical order. In fact, it is mystery that gives us the only hope of understanding the labyrinth, for as we imagine a solution to the mystery, we thereby imagine that there is some as yet unperceived principle of organisation among so much chaotic material. In the narrative labyrinth, mystery helps to orientate us, since readers, as much as the characters themselves, must attempt to decode, to understand a disordered, confusing and frightening world. For the reader, the promise of a conclusion gives us direction within the text. For the characters, mystery challenges them to read their possible world. Thus, the importance of the character of the acolyte detective in *Little Dorrit.* The acolyte is firstly a surrogate for the reader, attempting to decode the text from the same position of relative ignorance, and secondly subjected to the perils of reading and knowledge, representing to the reader the risks and difficulties of wanting to know.

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[50]. See Kayman's comments on the struggle between conflicting codes of mastery in section 1.3.

As the "dispersed grinders in the vast mill" (596), urban mystery constructs the role of a host of petty clerks, agents and functionaries. Pancks and Rugg are both office clerks and agents of minor types. Their hobby is the detection of family connections and unclaimed legacies. This is presented as both enigmatic and conspiratorial:

> The ensuing business proceedings were brief but curious, and rather in the nature of a conspiracy. Mr Pancks looked over his note-book, which was now getting full, studiously; and picked out little extracts, which he wrote on separate slips of paper on the table; Mr Rugg, in the meanwhile, looking at him with close attention, and Young John losing his uncollected eye in mists of meditation. (348)

The emphasis is on paper, writing and the pursuit of signs. Through inheritance they trace lineage and wealth: that is, they pursue the social and commercial structure of the Victorian world, just as Mr Meagles evaluates the family connections of his daughter's suitor. They are in fact, seeking out that which is both hidden and connected, the family tree that directs the dispersal of blood and inheritance, and they thereby aspire to knowledge, to some sort of insight, as well as their finder's fee. Dickens speaks of Pancks's "sagacity... patience and secrecy" (460) in the search. In many ways Pancks and his associates act as detectives, assiduously burrowing for the truth, but other characters in *Little Dorrit* know that even more is at stake in their detective work.

Arthur Clennam, though he falsely believes himself to be a passive individual, beyond the call of desire, is in other ways one of the novel's most active detective figures. Early on he develops an interest in the Dorrits because his mother's reticence arouses suspicions about his father's actions. He goes to the Marshalsea, probes Little Dorrit about the name "Clennam," eventually tackles even the daunting Circumlocution Office. Arthur Clennam speaks eloquently of his own youth, its austerity and deprivations, and yet what he seeks from his mother on returning to his childhood home is in some sense the real explanation, the key to memory and guilt, some repentance which is nothing less than the outward sign of our acknowledgement of the debts accumulated by the past. Arthur Clennam, his own childhood grievously wronged, indirectly seeks evidence of that in another wrong: "'Is it possible, mother...

that he had unhappily wronged any one, and made no reparation?'" (87). He fears. moreover, that the entire mode of life of a commercial family venture has in some sense done harm. His doubts are all the more powerful because of his own unacknowledged hatred of complicity in the business of the house:

> 'In grasping at money and in driving hard bargains — I have begun, and I must speak of such things now, mother — some one may have been grievously deceived, injured, ruined. You were the moving power of all this machinery before my birth; your stronger spirit has infused all my father's dealings for more than two score years. You can set these doubts to rest, I think, if you will really help me to discover the truth.' (88)

Arthur is given no immediate answer — like the rest of the characters of *Little Dorrit* he can only suspect and fear. He begins to suspect that the Clennam family secret has some relationship with the Dorrits, but the reasons for Mr Dorrit's debts are, as already observed, mysterious. Old wrongs, family secrets, these typically Dickensian motifs motivate Arthur's actions, while his search for the truth is a rebellion against imprisonment, arrest and the impenetrability of the past.

Behind Arthur lurks the figure of Rigaud, who acts out Arthur's suppressed anger towards Mrs Clennam. Rigaud has never been ambiguous in his pursuit of power through knowledge, and he is astute enough to recognise it in another. As he tells Mrs Clennam: "But no — no one but you knows where [the missing paper] is, and that's power; and, call yourself what you will, I call you a female Lucifer, in appetite for power!" (851). Power and knowledge are thus characterised as Luciferian desire in the fallen world, and it is Rigaud who is most often conceived of as an infernal being: "'people said at Marseilles that the devil was let loose'" (169). The devilish Rigaud is perhaps a projection of Arthur's repressed childhood self, the shadow of the boy who is locked in a closet by his own mother, "the veritable entrance to that bourne to which the tract had found him galloping" (72), as if he were already damned. Throughout *Little Dorrit*, certain pairings of characters act as complementary doubles, the one representing the repressed aspects of the other, as the massive, clumsy, childlike and voracious Maggie is a double for the slight, dextrous and prematurely aged Little Dorrit, who refuses food, and Mr F's Aunt is able to express

Flora Finching's repressed hostility towards Arthur[51]. Rigaud is able to challenge Mrs Clennam as her obedient son cannot, and yet when Arthur first meets Rigaud at his mother's house, his antipathetic reaction in some way resembles sibling jealousy (599-600). We see when Rigaud meets Minnie Gowan that his presence hints at the reproaches that Arthur again cannot bring himself to make: "it was as if he said, 'I have a secret power in this quarter. I know what I know'" (563). What Rigaud knows, and what Clennam also knows but cannot bring himself to admit, is that Minnie Gowan has married a worthless man presumably on the basis of sexual desire. Cavalletto, fleeing the false gentleman Rigaud, naturally comes under Clennam's patronage. His two masters are in fact aspects of each other. Rigaud, then, is the demonic shadow of Arthur's will to knowledge, able to act out his resentment against the world, his desire for autonomy against the mother and his latent aggressive impulses towards women.

As Robert Pendleton points out, Clennam and Rigaud share between them the function of master detective in the novel, and are together the "narrative guide" (313) through the labyrinth of *Little Dorrit.* Where Clennam is passive and unaggressive, Rigaud is active and threatening, yet individually both of them come to gather up many of the threads of the resolution, though Arthur is curiously absent from the end. Despite his characterisation as a passive detective, Clennam is by no means an incompetent one; in fact, his enquiries are often diligent and fortuitous. It is Arthur who is alerted to the importance of Little Dorrit, he who investigates her at the Marshalsea, he who challenges the Circumlocution Office, follows Miss Wade after accidentally spotting her in the street and initiates the inquiry after the missing "Blandois." As Pendleton observes: "Despite his timidity, then, Arthur does possess the psychoanalyst's essential quality of being constantly on the watch for the 'return of the repressed.' He also has an acute sense of the right time to suggest connections that will lead the 'patient' to realisation" (374-5). We see this when Arthur at first, however obliquely, challenges his mother, as he takes every pause and denial to press his

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51. See also Showalter 20-40 on the role of doubles in *Little Dorrit.*

questions. We have noted that for Arthur to question his mother is to resist her; to seek answers to the past is to try and renegotiate its relationship to the present. For Arthur his suspicions, like the relinquishing of his share of the possibly tainted family business, are a means of self-expression, a means by which the child makes a final break with the identity of the devouring parent.

Searching out secrets, in one form or another, dominates the novel's action. Arthur Clennam seeks out his own family past, investigates the Dorrits' debt, or pursues Daniel Doyce's cause through the Circumlocution Office. Later on, Pancks and his associates take up the search for the details of the Dorrit family tree. Flintwitch follows Little Dorrit to the Marshalsea; characters hunt for Miss Wade and Tattycorram; Cavalleto is sent after Rigaud and Rigaud, of course, comes to command the dark secret of the Clennam House. As the reader and the acolyte seek knowledge, and the power to interpret, they naturally aspire to the condition of the initiate. Yet in *Little Dorrit* the encounter with mystery leads to an exploration of the contradictions and stresses inherent in the initiate's position, for those who exercise power through secrecy are in turn trapped by the interdependence of those terms.

6.5. Initiates of the Prison.

Throughout Dickens characters recur who are intermediaries between mystery and the world of appearances. Such characters, like Jaggers, Tulkinghorn, or even Mr Bucket, often possess considerable power, but this is predicated on silence — on the unutterability of the enigma. Pip, pursuing his own secret patrimony, can be seen in this relationship to the enigmatic lawyer, Jaggers, whose eminence over the petty criminality of Little Britain is inspired by an almost religious awe. One of the oldest senses of mystery, the mystery of the guild, implies in turn mastery, and degrees of mastery, to which individuals aspire[52]. But knowledge is also dangerous and

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[52]. See section 1.3.

potentially dehumanising. Thus Jaggers is a remote, cold and sometimes unpleasant figure, and Tulkinghorn, dry and exacting, is surrounded by images of death and immurement. Often, the status of the initiate also implies isolation, as though the maintenance of secrets demands not only silence but withdrawal from human contact. Certainly, at the juncture of knowledge and power, the isolation of the initiate is most pronounced. For Tulkinghorn's hidden power to be efficacious, it must also be singular, unshared. Only Bucket, who in some ways does not seek knowledge solely for the power it affords him, enjoys any sort of personal relation with his wife, who follows and shares in his detective activities. *Little Dorrit* is composed of a complex mesh of such characters and such respective degrees of knowledge, but as well as the possession of secrets there is also the production of mystery, the dispersion of signs, clues and truth values, so that mystery can be as much created as discovered, and is always guarded about by the possibility of illusions, deceptions and fraudulence. Where Jaggers manipulates language in order to not know what he knows, the initiates of *Little Dorrit*, such as Mrs Clennam and Mr Merdle can manipulate the apparent in order that others believe what is false. Hemmed in by the demands of concealment, the most knowledgeable are often also the most isolated, and Mrs Clennam, who possesses the secrets of the past entirely, is an extreme example of this — a woman who has turned her secrecy into her personal, exclusive sect. Thus, the initiates of *Little Dorrit* demonstrate the extreme vulnerability of their position when it is tied up in the selfish exercise of power.

Mrs Clennam, like Miss Havisham, is consistent with her environment: crippled, constrained, gloomy and secretive. She is an invalid who cannot stand, and so her house is artificially propped up. She represents a terrifying mystery, just as the secrets of the city are gloomy and oppressive. Arthur Clennam inquires after some "'secret remorse'" of his father's, but his mother responds only with an accusation: "'You speak so mysteriously'" (87). It is she who is mysterious, she whose utterances point towards an unseen order of guilt and expiation, whose statements are, in fact, ambiguous confessions and partial clues: "'I endure without murmuring, because it is

appointed that I shall so make reparation for my sins. Reparation! Is there none in this room? Has there been none here this fifteen years?'" (89). What sins and what reparations, Mrs Clennam does not say; her prophetic manner is vague, and yet she subconsciously speaks to very specific acts. Her words are clues, and they are also uninterpreted signs, bearing an overt memory couched in her religious mania and a buried significance which will be transparent only when the conclusion comes and the history of the house is excavated by the efforts of the detective acolytes, Arthur and Rigaud.

Mrs Clennam is both powerful and crippled, frightening and ineffectual; like the Minotaur that occupies the Labyrinth, she is devouring monster and captive. As the House of Clennam is simultaneously a commercial structure and the remnants of a family, Mrs Clennam contains a secular mystery and associates it with divine mystery by elevating herself to the status of an Avatar of divine vengeance. Dickensian mystery is often haunted by the trace of the divine, while expressing powerfully the dislocation of the urban milieu, in which the divine is felt most urgently as an absence or an unsatisfied need. The process of secularisation does not necessitate an erasure of the divine, but does imply a kind of gathering opacity, a sense of loss and displaced authority. Thus, the streets of the city that Arthur encounters on his return to London echo with the bells that summon unwilling worshippers to empty churches: "At the ten minutes it became aware that the congregation would be scanty, and slowly hammered out in low spirits, They *won't* come, they *won't* come, they *won't* come!" (68). Mrs Clennam may be seen as the solitary deity of that alienating religion: the religion that Dickens condemns as profoundly unsuited to addressing the needs of an urban congregation. On the other hand, Mrs Clennam's practise of religion is little different from the practises of Victorian commercial life, and Dickens describes it as merely a more advanced form of this:

> Thus she was always balancing her bargains with the Majesty of heaven, posting up the entries to her credit, strictly keeping her set-off, and claiming her due. She was only remarkable in this, for the force and emphasis with which she did it. Thousand upon thousands do it, according to the varying manner, every day. (89)

Mrs Clennam, crippled as she is, is able to conduct the remnants of her business, and in one sense, her religion is merely an extension of her commercial identity. Her insistence on the value of work, where work itself is commerce, makes her an exemplar of the Protestant ethic taken to a capitalistic extreme. Though her terminology is always religious, Dickens is careful to maintain the connection between the poles of secular and divine mystery in her person. Thus, the tension between divine and secular mystery is also expressed through the uneasy polarity and connectedness between Mrs Clennam's capitalistic habits and her religious doctrine. This division is exacerbated further by a similar polarity between the public and the private, for Mrs Clennam's profession of faith is really a form of personal idolatry; that is, her religious beliefs are not an expression of her community with other believers but an intensely personal development of her frustrations, cruelty and vindictiveness. Mrs Clennam is determined by this complex of connected yet contradictory forces: religion, business and individual psychology — a tangled enough confusion for the labyrinths of her thought.

There is, in Mrs Clennam, a terrible power lodged within her physical incapacity. This is evident in her influence over her husband and son: she is able to condemn her husband to exile in China, and her son has not, in the course of his life, been able to resist her — "'I have lived the half of a long term of life, and never before set my own will against yours'" (86). She is associated with images of hardness, coldness, darkness and rage, oppression and terror, but her strength is also profoundly dehumanising: "With her cold grey eyes and her cold grey hair, and her immovable face, as stiff as the folds of her stony head-dress, — her being beyond reach of the season seemed but a fit sequence to her being beyond the reach of all changing emotions" (74). Her immunity from time is purchased at the cost of immunity from emotion. Her fearsome influence is bought at the price of her undefined physical degeneration. Thus, at the crux of her being there is this contradiction or instability, both power and weakness. In the middle of her self-justification, Dickens intervenes to describe her contradictions:

> she still abided by her old impiety — still reversed the order of Creation, and breathed her own breath into a clay image of her Creator. Verily, verily, travellers have seen many monstrous idols in many countries; but no human eyes have ever seen more daring, gross, and shocking images of the Divine nature than we creatures of the dust make in our own likenesses of our own bad passions. (844)

Mrs Clennam has, in her audacity, nothing less than the will to invert the order of the created world. In doing so, she becomes entirely self-contained and hermetic, the creature and agent of the God that she herself has made, self-appointed high priestess and reigning deity of an idiosyncratic faith that validates her own vindictiveness. It is a supreme reversal, both impressive and repulsive, that Dickens calls "daring, gross, and shocking." Mrs Clennam terms herself "servant and minister" (844), and thus claims the whole weight of Divine wrath, while denying her own responsibility. By falsifying her relationship with the Divine, by inscribing the Divine with nothing less than her own pride and anger, a fury which she then impersonally (or so she thinks) visits on her victims, Mrs Clennam becomes the interpreter and constructor of mystery. The words that are the clue and key to the mystery, the cryptic "D.N.F," are Mrs Clennam's alone to understand and act upon: "'"Do not forget." It spoke to me like a voice from an angry cloud. Do not forget the deadly sin, do not forget the appointed discovery, do not forget the appointed suffering'" (844). Mrs Clennam is the self-made, unique initiate, privileged by her possession of the secret to dole out its consequences.

The very moment of her justification is also the moment of her failure. Her power is ultimately nothing more than the product of secrecy. Mystery empowers Mrs Clennam, but she cannot, in turn, manage mystery. Arthur's mere suspicion, the very notion that there is something unknown, is the end of her total ascendancy over him. When he first questions her, he first resists her. Thus, Mrs Clennam's authority implies also fear, immobility, imprisonment. By insisting on the terms and language of retribution, Mrs Clennam condemns herself to imprisonment, enacts her own punishment, as Arthur suggests to himself: "In that long imprisonment here [in the Marshalsea], and in her own long confinement to her room, did his mother find a balance to be struck?" (129). As the urban labyrinth is predicated upon mystery, the

initiate's assertion of power, the initiate's dialogue with mystery, is merely the point of integration with imprisonment. The analogy between Mrs Clennam and Mr Dorrit links a complex articulation between home, commerce and imprisonment.

Mr Merdle, like Mrs Clennam, is a character at once isolated and empowered by knowledge, and a secularised god. Merdle is admired and worshipped as a minor deity of commercialism, an initiate of the mysteries of the stock-market, yet his simple knowledge of his own guilt and thievery makes him a prisoner, shabby and pathetic. Though both characters are united in their unique insights (it is whatever they conceal that precipitates the major reversals of the novel) they are otherwise opposites in terms of personality, for where Mrs Clennam is associated with strictness, will, an exaggerated personality, Mr Merdle barely seems to exhibit any personality at all. Like the Veneerings of *Our Mutual Friend*, whose enigma is lodged in their vacuity, he does not personally impress the society in which he is so ardently admired: "He was the most disinterested of men, — did everything for Society, and got as little out of all his gain and care, as a man might" (293). As the Veneerings are, Merdle is perpetually marginalised at his own parties: "In this same Society... he hardly seemed to enjoy himself much, and was mostly to be found against walls and behind doors" (293). Yet as the flip-side of Mrs Clennam's physical incapacity is her emotional dominance, the counter-balance to Merdle's interpersonal awkwardness is his renown. Like Mrs Clennam, he is a self-made deity, an initiate in the mysteries of money, and thereby made remarkable, or even an object of veneration:

> All people knew (or thought they knew) that he had made himself immensely rich; and, for that reason alone, prostrated themselves before him, more degradedly and less excusably than the darkest savage creeps out of his hole in the ground to propitiate, in some log or reptile, the Deity of his benighted soul. (611)

The contingency of this status is Merdle's criminal fraudulence, a fact known only to himself. This manifests itself in an unconsciously repeated gesture of imprisonment: "his hands crossed under his uneasy coat-cuffs, clasping his wrists as if he were taking himself into custody" (445). Though a petty god of the material world, Merdle's self-

inflicted arrest is the corollary of his secret mastery in an economy of purely nominal, and thus false, values.

Money in the new economy, as Dickens asserts in *Our Mutual Friend*, is conjured out of nothing, produced not by physical creation but on paper, through signs, and therefore becomes a mysterious currency. Merdle deals in this vaporous commodity, and the production of wealth follows the progress of the propagation of fame. The idea of financial speculation is particularly resonant here. The phrase implies something like the commodification of the imaginary. Merdle has the same radical emptiness of identity as Lammle of *Our Mutual Friend*, in that his value as a person is determined only by shares and dealings in shares. Mrs Merdle, also, as "something to hang jewels on" is the result of another "successful" Merdle speculation (293). The semiotic, the symbolic value, takes precedence over any real result, as Pancks's calculations, which always show a profit, demonstrate. This speculation is a displacement of the imaginary; imaginative speculation is misplaced in financial speculation, especially when the speculators fail to perceive the depths, or the lack of depth, of the speculative subject, the financier.

Renown, for Merdle, is his virtual commodity; it is his only true asset in a commercial structure based on information rather than materials, and it spreads like an epidemic: "That it is at least as difficult to stay a moral infection as a physical one; that such a disease will spread with the malignity and rapidity of the Plague... is a fact firmly established by experience" (627). Knowledge of the symptoms is not the same as knowledge of the cause. The symbolic internalisation of Merdle's magical gift for money, the sign of his dis-ease, is his mysterious complaint. There is much speculation about the cause, which Jury puts down to strain: "Not to intrude on the sacred mysteries of medicine, he took it, now... that this was the case" (299). Physician concurs, and yet contradicts this by observing that there is nothing physically wrong with Merdle. Thus his "complaint" is the clue to the source of his wealth — mere fraudulence, the absence of material cause. Like Mrs Clennam, Mr Merdle contains mystery, and even goes so far as to blasphemously defy the divine order, in as

much as Bar refers to him as "one of the greatest converters of the root of all evil into the root of all good" (297). Thus, in the case of Mr Merdle as well as Mrs Clennam, we see an example of secularisation: the shift of the secular value of money into the realm of the ethical. The signs of the potential danger and strictures of this are visible in Merdle's complaint as they are in Mrs Clennam's crippled state.

Mr Merdle is constrained by his own lack of personality, his social ineptitude, alienated even from his own possessions, so that in the rooms of his house "he wandered, as he always did, like the last person on earth who had any business to approach them" (449). His secret, apparent only as digestive discomfort, imposes an effect of silence which carries over into all his social interactions: "the master-mind of the age, true to its characteristic of being at all times a mind that had as little as possible to say for itself and great difficulty in saying it, became mute again" (765). For Merdle, his suicide is merely a final gesture of erasure, a terminal lapse into silence. Whatever the contents of the note left to Physician — they are never made known to the reader — we can be sure they include no personal appeals. The immobility of death is like the culmination of the captive state of the virtually anonymous individual trapped in the illusion of Merdle. He commits suicide with a borrowed penknife, as though Dickens wishes to emphasise the totality of his indebtedness. Yet death is also the moment of revelation. The silence of the secret reaches its termination in suicide, but then becomes eloquent. Thus for the first time we see clearly the Merdle we have always suspected: "the body of a heavily-made man, with an obtuse head, and coarse, mean, common features" (771). The living Merdle is as much a meaningless surface as the filmy Veneering. Only in death is his materiality apparent.

The body of Merdle, reduced to a simple sign, discloses the secrets that Mr Merdle could not. Rumours follow on the immediate discovery, but at last, the truth comes out, or, more precisely, the mystery is publicised:

> He had sprung from nothing, by no natural growth or process that any one could account for; he had been, after all, a low, ignorant fellow; he had been a down-looking man, and no one had ever been able to quite catch his eye; he had been taken up by all sorts of people in quite an unaccountable manner; he had

> never had any money of his own, his ventures had been utterly reckless and his expenditure had been most enormous. (776)

The facts remain, but the case persists in being unaccountable. Merdle's truth is that he was "simply the greatest Forger and the greatest Thief that ever cheated the gallows," (777) and yet no one knows how this came to be. As Mrs Clennam inverts Divinity by making God in her own image, Merdle has mastered an inversion of society by situating a criminal at its peak. Merdle, "the sitter at great men's feasts, the roc's egg of great ladies' assemblies, the subduer of exclusiveness, the leveller of pride, the patron of patrons" (777), the exemplary type of his order, is a fraud, and thereby Dickens subverts the entirety of the society constructed about Merdle, both its habits and modes of production. The secret of Merdle's complaint is the secret of a sick and corrupt society, namely, that its relationships are a form of thievery. Where the criminal is emulated and admired, all members of that society are thereby implicated. They are criminal defaulters too, except that their gaol is the city. If one suspects that society is a form of conspiracy, Merdle is the proof.

Merdle's suicide leads to the first stage of a catastrophe, the ramifications of which affect the whole of the city, as Bar and Physician observe:

> they both looked up at the sunny morning sky... and then looked round upon the immense city, and said, if all those hundreds and thousands of beggared people who were yet asleep could only know, as they two spoke, the ruin that impended over them, what a fearful cry against one miserable soul would go up to Heaven! (774)

Secrecy, the status of the initate, is not a stable condition in *Little Dorrit.* The energies bound in the initiate are frequently discharged abruptly and catastrophically. At this liminal point between initiate and acolyte, we face the dangers and potentials of transformation enabled through knowledge. In a densely self-referential novel such as *Little Dorrit,* change is often another kind of self-similarity, substituting one prison for another, one enigma for another. In the conclusion, then, as the mystery comes to be exposed and the initiate's hoarded secrecy collapses, what new mode of insight can the novel articulate?

6.6. Resolving the Labyrinth.

As we attempt to read the labyrinthine text of *Little Dorrit*, to chart and thereby contain its baffling complexities, we enter an ambiguous relationship with the initiates, who both interpret and represent mystery to us, and in their own turn inhabit the mazes of power and secrecy. It is only the idea of the mystery that gives us orientation within the hypertext of *Little Dorrit*. Despite the flourishes of the narrative's procedure, the promise of the double-narrative, an explanatory end-point, gives us the possibility of direction. Secrecy is not a stable condition; as the novel progresses characters search for and acquire knowledge, discover connections, and each of these discoveries initiates a catastrophic change, a sudden reversal. Pancks's discoveries free the Dorrits from debt and imprisonment; Merdle's death hurls others into financial disaster. Even the grimmest and most daunting of the novel's secret-keepers, Mrs Clennam, must submit to investigation and confession through the intercession of Rigaud and Arthur Clennam. Reading with the double-narrative and reading with the mystery, we must finally come to an encounter between Mrs Clennam and Little Dorrit as twin contestants for the novel's interpretative strategies.

Given the complexities of Dickens's multiple denouement (the Penguin edition editor feels obliged to supply a summary for the perplexed reader) and the sprawling extent of the novel, we might ask how much of the ending is consistent and how much of it — Clennam's unknown real mother, the suppressed codicil, the tenuous connection to Frederick Dorrit — is Dickens's hurried patching together of loose ends. Yet Dickens asserted that he had always planned and prepared for one aspect of the mystery, which indicates that a great deal of the background may have been in his mind since he began. In Affery's "dreams" and night terrors, in the creaks and noises of visitation, we are presented with a subsidiary mystery from very early on. When the house collapses, this enigma is clarified: "The mystery of the noises was out now; Affery, like greater people, had always been right in her facts, and always wrong in the theories she deduced from them" (863). A double-narrative in miniature, then, in

which the narrative facts are later explained or contextualised in the light of the true story of the subsiding house, implies an even broader process of planning. Dickens's angry response to Stephen's charge in the July 1857 *Edinburgh Review* that he had based the wreck of the house on contemporary events suggests that this narrative thread was developed from the beginning (*Working Notes* 268). Though Affery is mistaken as to the cause of the mysterious sounds, her mistakes are informative. Affery is convinced that it is Arthur's real mother: "'she haunts the house, then. Who else rustles about it, making signals by dropping dust so softly? Who else comes and goes, and marks the walls with long crooked touches when we are all a-bed?'" (854). In a sense it is Arthur's dead mother who haunts the house, who haunts the memory of the house, and her history is the mystery of the fall of the house of Clennam. Thus, one trivial outward mystery bears a false explanation and a covert one, but the falsehood, the haunting of the house, leads, in fact, into another deeper mystery. The connection hints at a unified conception of the mystery from the outset. As Dickens projected, the Clennam house is haunted by the ghost of the past, and its discovery will lead to the house's destruction, as Rigaud, acting in place of Arthur Clennam, will ultimately confront Mrs Clennam with the narrative she has personally suppressed throughout the novel.

The catalyst of disaster is Rigaud, whose threats and presence force Mrs Clennam's confession, and yet in another respect he is continually displaced, acting either as a surrogate for other characters, or shifted out of the role of narrator. Rigaud is the subject of multiple projections; though in one sense he is Arthur Clennam's active double (see the discussion in section 6.4), he is also the incarnation of Mrs Clennam's infernal faith. The "devilish" Rigaud is the demon summoned by Mrs Clennam's own impiety, the one figure most alert to her moral and religious hypocrisy as he sneeringly calls her his "'lady of piety'" (846). Mrs Clennam seeks, furiously, to deny his intercession, to state her own case and thereby usurp his privilege as narrator: "'I will tell it myself! I will not hear it from your lips, and with the taint of your wickedness upon it. Since it must be seen, I will have it seen by the light I stood in'" (843). While

Rigaud and Mrs Clennam struggle for the role of narrator, Arthur is also there through his intermediaries. Pancks's relayed command to Affery, """he would say, "Affery, tell your dreams!""" (834), is an injunction to initiate speech. The narration of dreams is the psychoanalyst's technique. Here, Arthur is not so much interested in analysing the one subject as exposing the collective repressed memories of the household. Before Affery first "dreams" we know that Arthur himself is the dreamer of the family: "When Mrs Flintwinch dreamed she usually dreamed, unlike the son of her old mistress, with her eyes shut" (81). His command, then, is an intuitive leap, a feat of imagination as much as deduction, that complements Rigaud's mode of investigation. Arthur understands that Affery's dreams are in fact the signs of repression, that her visions, once activated, are a key to the secrecy of all the inhabitants of the house, their collective unconscious. Affery is at last determined to speak — "'I'll hear all I don't know, and say all I know'" (835) — and in this sense she is allied with Arthur. Permanently oppressed by the "clever ones," against whom she is partly aligned with Arthur, by publicising her dreams she invites analysis and interpretation. She demands and is given one chance to interpret the signs, secrets and mysteries that surround her. Thus Rigaud, aided by so many participants and doubles, is not the unique explicator of the denouement.

Displacement and complexity render, through a persistence of mystery, an effect which is other than closure. In the revelatory chapters, then, we have not only explanation and exegesis, as every character will say what they know and hear what they don't know, but also an explosive transfer of energies, a break with stasis, a recreation of power balances. Secrets and mysteries are revealed, circulated, explained, but also retained. Characters confess, learn, but also conceal. What occurs, then, is less a total revelation than a kind of transformation, remarkable for its mobility and turbulence yet also destined to exhaustion and acquiescence. The solution to the mystery does, indeed, bring about alterations but also the end of disturbance, the termination of narrative deviation. Mrs Clennam briefly embodies this transfer of energies in her own return to mobility, but ultimately her new-found freedom of

movement is merely the precursor to final collapse of her own physical being and of her house. The destruction of the house creates its own silence, in the death of Rigaud and the disappearance of Flintwitch. For all the force of the revelations, they have no real impact on events. Mrs Clennam, whatever her crimes against the dead, has been merely guilty of a crime of omission against the Dorrits in withholding the codicil. More remarkably, Arthur Clennam, despite his surrogate presence in his representatives, Pancks and Affery, and his double, Rigaud, never learns the truth of the mystery, at least within the text as we read it. He remains an outsider to the secret that he has sought throughout the novel. With such a conclusion, then, what has altered?

The conclusion turns less on Arthur Clennam, than on Little Dorrit, who learns the secret of her own disinheritance, who has, in fact, the truth forced upon her in the imperative command: "'Read them'" (858). This is what the weight of the double-narrative has been tending towards; the solution to the mystery is the disinheritance of Little Dorrit, the act that led to her father's continued imprisonment and her own life in the Marshalsea. Therefore, the revelation of the mystery plot points us ultimately to the thematic meeting between these two figures. Mrs Clennam, the initiate, has produced and mastered her particular mystery, but her mystery has always been a mystery of concealment, of endless layers of denial and self-justification, the substitution of illusion for illusion which is another type of imprisonment in the novel. By exposing herself to Little Dorrit's scrutiny and knowledge, she is read, revealed, made vulnerable, and in this there is perhaps her only redemption: the pathetic admission that she had yet hoped to win the love of her misappropriated child. Mrs Clennam, however, can never be entirely redeemed, never removed from the labyrinth of her own personality. She remains figuratively a darkened subject: "She stood in the shadow so that she was only a veiled form to Little Dorrit in the light" (859). The contrast is explicit: against this twisted woman's dark doctrine of vengeance, Dickens is able to erect another mystery, that of Little Dorrit's forgiveness and compassion. Little Dorrit's exemplary selflessness, her detachment from materialism and her compassion,

divorces her from the isolating power dynamic that we associate with the initiate. In a world where secrecy is the shadow, Little Dorrit at the moment of knowledge is associated with the light: "The shadow of the wall and of the prison buildings... made it too dark to read there, with the dusk deepening apace, save in the window. In the window, where a little of the bright summer evening sky could shine upon her, Little Dorrit read" (858). The illustration of the title page of the first edition also shows Little Dorrit stepping across the threshold of the prison in a strong bar of light, associated with freedom and knowledge (33). In the contrast between Little Dorrit and Mrs Clennam rendered by the mystery plot lies the resolution of the novel.

Little Dorrit represents temporarily the light of a knowledge which is founded within Divine mystery, but is the type of the mystery of forgiveness rather than of vengeance: "'Be guided only by the healer of the sick, the raiser of the dead, the friend of all who were afflicted and forlorn, the patient Master who shed tears of compassion for our infirmities'" (861). This suggests also those mysteries of love referred to by Manette in *A Tale of Two Cities* (165). The Christian Master and guide, then, represents a type of compassionate knowledge that can direct the possessor in the labyrinth: "'There can be no confusion in following Him, and seeking for no other footsteps, I am certain'" (861). Here, she resembles one of the novel's other acolyte figures, Physician, the only character with any insight into the other doomed initiate, Mr Merdle.

> Many wonderful things did he see and hear, and much irreconcilable moral contradiction did he pass his life among; yet his equality of compassion was no more disturbed than the Divine Master's of all healing was. He went, like the rain, among the just and unjust, doing all the good he could.... (768)

There is no freedom from the labyrinth, no outside point of clear vision and understanding among so many contradictions. In a novel of complex journeys and hypertextual wanderings, Dickens's tragic insight is into the irreconcilable "stumblings and wandering" (713) of life, which only the next world will render with clarity. But *Little Dorrit* does admit of limited insight, the ability at least to see the prison as the prison, and thereby to act, as Little Dorrit acts, with patient attention to what is

possible. Both Little Dorrit and Physician represent a Christ-like combination of healing and compassion. A transformation is made possible by this doctrine; we are able to see the city anew, the prison bars of its metaphysical secrecy changed into the signs, divinely revealed, of a redemptive order:

> As they crossed the bridge, the clear steeples of many churches looked as if they had advanced out of the murk that usually enshrouded them, and come much nearer. The smoke that rose into the sky had lost its dingy hue and taken a brightness upon it. The beauties of sunset had not faded from the long films of cloud that lay at peace in the horizon. From a radiant centre, over the whole length and breadth of the tranquil firmament great shoots of light streamed among the early stars, like signs of the blessed later covenant of peace and hope that changed the crown of thorns into a glory. (862)

The passage reminds us of Sydney Carton's last vision of Paris and of the sunlight striking into the Cathedral at the termination of *Edwin Drood.* There is here a glimpse of an immanent providential order, but the contrast between the radiant centre and the smoke, murk and filmy clouds, indicates that this vision is only a brief reprieve from obscurity rather than a return to an originating Divine order. Little Dorrit, then, at the end can be the unconscious vessel of an alternative to the falsifying, crippling mysteries of the urban initiates. Her mystery is a doctrine revealed through divine providence and forgiveness rather than discovered, allowing a temporary point of recovery from urban mystery.

Mrs Clennam's freedom, like the vision of the city transformed, does not endure for long — she is returned to absolute immobility and silence, condemned to live and die "a statue" (863), while Rigaud perishes in the collapsed house, and her secret is indefinitely concealed. Whatever the terms of her appeal to Little Dorrit for secrecy, the logic of secrecy is silence, and thus mortality. If Arthur Clennam learns anything, he learns thereafter the only open secret of the novel: that Little Dorrit loves him. Arthur Clennam is rewarded with the only secret that was never a mystery to the reader. His brief imprisonment is, however, an emotional recognition of his psychological imprisonment in a debilitating past. Entering the prison as a debtor, he subconsciously confronts those very fears about the past that he has harboured. Arthur's constant probing of personal history and secrecy is not wasted if he can finally

recover within himself those sympathetic and imaginative impulses almost crushed by his childhood: "in the tones of the voice that read to him, there were memories of an old feeling of such things, and echoes of every merciful and loving whisper that had ever stolen to him in his life" (884). Arthur Clennam's detective efforts never recover the secret destroyed in the papers burnt by Little Dorrit, but this does not make his anguished negotiations with his past entirely futile.

Knowledges are exchanged, but mystery is not necessarily dissipated. The world is changed, and yet in some senses it is the same, as minor characters such as Mrs General, or Mrs Merdle, continue much as before: "thus, on the whole, she came out of her furnace like a wise woman, and did exceedingly well" (873). The Circumlocution Office is not to be reformed; Minnie Gowan will continue in an unhappy marriage; the Marshalsea itself remains "changeless and barren" (883). A partial glimpse of a greater order does not mean that this order itself is partial or temporary but that our action within this world will always be subject to the world's limitations. Thus, though we trust that their lives will be happy and fulfilling, there is no sense that Little Dorrit and Arthur will be able to reform anything more than their own close (and virtually enclosed) circle, and the state of society might be compared to the restless, repetitive motions of Fanny Dorrit, "going into society forever and a day" (895). Little Dorrit's strange gesture of burning the papers, and thereby ultimately preserving the secrecy of *Little Dorrit*, points towards the novel's residual mysteriousness in a society that is largely unchanged.

6.7. Interpreting the labyrinth.

The idea of the hypertext, a non-linear representation of the text composed of nodes and links, like the strands of a web, the corridors of a labyrinth, or the plots of a multi-plot novel, suggests new methods of reading but also limitations. The new critic's response to the old accusation that novels (and especially Dickens's novels) were "loose baggy monsters" elicited the kind of defence that sought to reduce

bagginess and looseness, to find a sort of definitive description through a dominant mode of symbolism that would effectively contain the novel[53]. The hypertext confronts us instead with the possibility of multiple readings, and reiterated variants, a complexity bounded only by the coherency of the text. There are endless paths through the labyrinth, but the labyrinth stays the same. *Little Dorrit* persuades the reader that the world is a maze of dust, of unforeseen spatial and temporal connections, a labyrinth of illusions. We are led into the streets of the great city and the urban labyrinth, a space constituted by enigmas, secrecy and oppression, a city whose past and commerce are unknown. Mystery gives us some sense of orientation in this labyrinth; mystery focuses and enables narration, as we cling to the possibility of interpreting various signs and clues. Within the labyrinth, a character such as Arthur Clennam seeks to interpret and correct the past resident in such enigmatic signs as D.N.F. But such seekers must confront the mastery and knowledge of initiates such as Mrs Clennam, who hold knowledge and are in turn possessed, immobilised, or destroyed by it. The status of the initiate, at once empowered and vulnerable, shares in the ambiguity and terrors of urban mystery. Like Mrs Clennam and Mr Merdle the initiate is often imprisoned within his or her own unique knowledge. To confront and contain the enigma is to invite explanation and to risk destruction. Rigaud, in his demonic will to power, dies at the moment of discovery and confrontation with mystery. Arthur Clennam, despite the intervention of his surrogates, never finds out the truth of the past that so oppresses him. Only Little Dorrit, because she moves freely within the prison by accepting the prison, is privileged to hold the essential secret. Her power to forgive, and the mystery of her compassion, enables a break from the past, but does not definitively change the world, or abolish urban mystery. The Clennams are able to live again within the streets, among "the arrogant and the froward and the vain," (895) but though they have navigated part of the labyrinth, the labyrinth itself, in all its inalienable mysteriousness, persists.

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53. For example, see Daleski, "Large Loose Baggy Monsters and *Little Dorrit*," in which Daleski argues for the "unity" of *Little Dorrit* under the comprehensive heading of debt.

7. The Kindred Mysteries of *Bleak House*.

> Before he dies, all his experiences in these long years resolve themselves in his head to one point, a question he has not yet asked the doorkeeper.... 'Everyone strives to reach the Law,' says the man, 'so how does it happen that for all these many years no-one but myself has ever begged for admittance?' The doorkeeper recognises that the man has reached his end, and, to let his fading senses catch the words, roars in his ear: 'No-one else could ever be admitted here, since the gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it.'
>
> — Kafka, "Before the Law." *The Trial.*

7.1. A Mystery in Chancery.

Mr Snagsby and Mr Tulkinghorn labour through the London streets. "Jostling against clerks... counsel and attorneys," they are "diving through law and equity, and through that kindred mystery, the street mud, which is made of nobody knows what, and collects about us nobody knows whence or how" (186). In search of the enigmatic Nemo, they labour physically through the novel's other mysteries, equity and the street mud, in the midst of this radical confusion, this impenetrable absence of cause. The mud itself, historically a noxious compound of ashes, soot, street litter and horse manure (Schwarzbach 124), represents a total loss of cohesion, a return to primitive matter, and the inexplicable sanitary conditions of a great city, while law and equity represent an equally decayed system of administration. Their journey is paradigmatic in a novel of which J. Hillis Miller could write: "*Bleak House* as a totality is a 'mystery story'" (*World* 168). Conclusive as this formula is, it in turn begs the question: if *Bleak House* is a mystery story, what is its mystery? If the totality is mysterious, does this not then render the reading of its mystery impossibly opaque? For the mystery of *Bleak House* seems always to be affected by startling bifurcations. It is a question not merely of law and equity, but law and equity *and* the street-mud. It is not only the mystery of the law and the mud as kindred conditions, but a mystery of *kindred*, that is, the relationship of one human being to another. Yet where these mysteries of kindred offer the possibility of resolution we must confront the problem of the

relationship that this mystery of familial kindred bears to the mystery of Chancery under the dominion of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. At every point we attempt, as readers, a kind of synthesis, perhaps arising out of the sensation that J. Hillis Miller described as "an intuition that what are apparently disconnected fragments could actually be made to fit together into an intelligible whole" (*World* 169). The text posits and invites these speculations:

> What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him when he swept the churchyard-step? What connexion can there have been between many people in innumerable histories of the world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together! (272)

At the same time, the pun between causal connections and family connections confuses connections by multiplying connections. The text of *Bleak House* is, like *Little Dorrit,* hypertextual in the extreme, always suggesting hidden structures, resonances, a proliferation of links, yet these links lead to the very making of equivalences, the descent of all objects into undifferentiated dust, mud itself, which defeats the notion of a determinable centre and stable relationships — a solvable, definable mystery. Thus, even the narrative is divided between Esther and a "narrator," opening up further divisions of modes of apprehension between the irrational and rational, the intuitive and logical, the temporal and a-temporal, the impersonal and personal. The mystery of *Bleak House* is essentially relational, a mystery of kindreds. The force of the double-narrative is here virtually that of the double-narrative squared: all these kindreds and parallels are moving towards connection (or knowledge of connexions), while also progressing towards the conclusion of the double-narrative, some solution to the question of causation, conjunction, inheritance[54]. Yet this is resisted and compounded by the novel's chaotic dispersion of the text, the shifting of signs, categories and clues. Where *Bleak House* is, as Hillis Miller claims, a mystery story in its entirety, a reading of *Bleak House* must be a reading of Dickensian mystery in its entirety.

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54. As always, "double-narrative" refers to the form of the mystery narrative in general, not the two-fold narration of *Bleak House*.

7.2. Equity and the Street Mud.

The Court of Chancery, established on the legal principle of equity, comes to represent not so much the powers of human judgement but the second law of thermodynamics[55]. For all objects within the Court tend not to resolution but to dissolution, and thereby lead towards undifferentiated, formless matter. Equity is co-equivalent with the mud through which Mr Snagsby and Tulkinghorn struggle. The mud smears and dominates the opening of *Bleak House*, but this physical churning leads, even more alarmingly, into the dissolution of categories:

> As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holburn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes — gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, indistinguishable in the mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to the very blinkers. (49)

Dogs are not distinct from the mud; horses are little better. The smoke is both a watery drizzle, an icy snowfall, and a shroud for a world which is paradoxically dying and primordial, located at both the beginning and end of geological time, the age of the dinosaurs and the expiration of the sun. Objects and time are confused in a general mire, in which the airborne smoke is comparable with the accumulating mud. Hence, the image of fog is not only of the physical descent of objects into slush but what Dickens represents intuitively as the decay of information into incoherence. As it is a short verbal step from mud to M'lud (Wright 100), it is a short step from mud and fog to the Court of Chancery:

> The raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest, near that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation: Temple Bar. And hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln's Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his Court of Chancery. (50)

In the Court of Chancery, the human search for explanation becomes a process akin to the production of mist, the accumulation of the entropy of information, of pure noise:

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55. Which can be expressed thus: For a closed system entropy (the value representing waste heat or disorder) is either constant or increasing.

> On such an afternoon, some score of members of the High Court of Chancery bar ought to be here — as here they are — mistily engaged in one of the thousand stages of an endless cause, tripping one another up on slippery precedents, groping knee-deep in technicalities, running their goat-hair and horsehair warded heads against walls of word, and making a pretence of equity with serious faces, as players might. (50)

A series of figurative substitutions here further confuse the actual and the virtual. Like the pedestrians outside in the mud, the lawyers trip and grope knee-deep in the written material which is counterpart to the formless matter of the fog and the street slime. The domain of Chancery, however, is not merely the centre of this confusion: like the seal that Miss Flite compounds with that of the Apocalypse, it is the sign and the source for the condition of the city and of the world.

Bleak House is haunted by the motif of decay and degeneration, the heat-death of the Universe hinted at in the opening's "death of the sun" (49). Death is ubiquitous throughout the novel, most powerfully in the scenes at Chesney Wold. Here the narrator, in contemplating the lineage of the Dedlocks, almost achieves an inversion of life and death, haunting the dead as the dead haunt the living:

> so think, as I think, of the gap that they would make in this domain when they were gone; so find it, as I find it, difficult to believe that it could be, without them; so pass from my world as I pass from theirs, now closing the reverberating door; so leave no blank to miss them, and so die. (620)

Death, the state of maximum entropy, frames the novel: "as all partings foreshadow the great final one — so, empty rooms, bereft of a familiar presence, mournfully whisper what your room and what mine must one day be" (845). Death is, of course, the terminal silence, the ultimate mystery. But in its unutterability it is a null point, a condition that cannot be analysed. Thus, this mystery, though it is at the core of *Bleak House*, is not the mystery of *Bleak House*, or rather, its expression is not through the unalterable laws of decay but through a mystery of kindred. The problem is not that of death but the manner in which a living society implicates and replicates itself in death. For as the mud and equity gather and must be removed — "we only knowing in general that there is too much of it, we find it necessary to shovel it away" (186) — the mystery of *Bleak House* is not so much the inevitability of the dying of the light but the

consequences of this for social action, the complicity of the urban world and its inhabitants in this chaos.

As Chancery, in the centre of the fog and the mud, represents the apotheosis of entropy and noise, it is also the centre of the systematic abuses that permeate the city and, through the city, the nation. The process of secularisation shows us the institute of Chancery as an attempt at human ordering in a world withdrawn from divine authority, where the stress of this absence is evident in Miss Flite's confusion of the Chancellor's seal and the Great Seal. As such, Chancery is typical of the institutions of the mysteries novel. It is the originating point of the inertia and ruin that extend throughout society:

> This is the Court of Chancery; which has its decaying houses and its blighted lands in every shire; has its worn-out lunatic in every madhouse, and its dead in every churchyard; which has its ruined suitor, with his slipshod heels and threadbare dress, borrowing and begging through the round of every man's acquaintances. (51).

The passage could function hypertextually as a master-node for the text. The "decaying house" is the former Bleak House, or a building in Tom-all-Alone's; the "blighted lands" are those of Chesney Wold in Lincolnshire; the "worn out lunatic" might be Miss Flite or Tom Jarndyce; the "dead" anyone from Nemo to Jo; the "ruined suitor," Gridley. From madness to death to blighted lands and crumbling houses, the Court of Chancery extends, containing and communicating the mystery of its influence. *Bleak House* leads us from Chancery to a variety of broken, dilapidated houses and waste-lands. We are carried from run-down lawyer's offices to the ramshackle home of Mrs Jellyby, to the rooms of Krook's Shop, desolate brickworks and broken tenements, even to the calmly decaying Chesney Wold. Tom-all-Alone's is but the most ruinous of all these establishments. Naturally, it is a property in the Court:

> 'There is, in that city of London there, some property of ours which is much at this day what Bleak House was then — I say property of ours, meaning the Suit's.... It is a street of perishing blind houses, with their eyes stoned out; without a pane of glass, without so much as a window frame, with the bare blank shutters tumbling from their hinges and falling asunder; the iron rails peeling away in flakes of rust; the chimneys sinking in, the stone steps at every door (and every door might be Death's Door) turning stagnant green; the very crutches on which the ruins are propped, decaying. (147)

A property in Chancery, like Bleak House, Tom-all-Alone's is one more example of a variety of bleak houses that extend throughout the novel. All of them, in their dilapidation and decay, their Gothic neglect, evidence the failure of the system, a pressing urban mystery.

Tom-all-Alone's in particular represents a dreadful enclosure[56], the nexus of urban fear. It is the point of maximum ruin, where even the inhabitants are portrayed as sub-human vermin. In the darkness of urban mystery, Tom-all-Alone's holds and conceals all of its terrors. Though the property is in Chancery its condition, like the derivation of its title, is inexplicable. The unknown Tom who gives the place its name is at one with an unrecoverable series of steps that led to Tom-all-Alone's present condition:

> Whether 'Tom' is the popular representative of the original plaintiff or defendant in Jarndyce and Jarndyce; or, whether Tom lived there when the suit had laid the street waste, all alone, until other settlers came to join him; or, whether the traditional title is a comprehensive name for a retreat cut off from company and put out of the pale of hope; perhaps nobody knows. (273-4)

How the urban world came to be locked in the case, in Chancery, condemned to poverty and decay, is unknown. The point where the Chancery suit became nothing but a discussion of costs, the point of slippage where the merits of the case gave way to inanity, is similarly inexplicable. The reason is named by John Jarndyce's coinage, "Wiglomeration," but this still cannot account for the state of affairs that adheres: "'How mankind ever came to be afflicted with Wiglomeration, or for whose sins these young people ever fell into a pit of it, I don't know; so it is" (148). The series of properties in Chancery, then, from Tom-all-Alone's to the variety of bleak houses, evidence the mystery of an urban world rendered into the dominion of an unresolvable cause.

The Tom of Tom-all-Alone's reminds us of Tom Jarndyce, who, "In despair blew his brains out at a coffee-house in Chancery Lane" (52). We cannot tell whether they are the same Tom, but the connection persists between Tom Jarndyce and the

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[56]. Following Maxwell, I borrow this term from Walter.

Bleak House of his possession: "'the brains seem to me to have been blown out of the house too; it was so shattered and ruined'" (146). From Tom to Tom, Bleak House to the other bleak houses, there is kinship, connection, not merely between Chancery and and its physical possessions in decay, but between the human beings who are absorbed in the conditions of the suit: "Innumerable children have been born into the cause; innumerable young people have married into it; innumerable old people have died out of it" (52). The Chancery suitors, as much as the properties in the cause, are trapped and implicated in the suit, and, like Tom, thrust "out of the pale of hope" (274). And in as much as the members of Miss Flite's family were drawn into debt, drunkenness, prostitution and death (554), the Chancery suit represents a variety of urban social ills and the causes of crime. Thus, the poison of Chancery is not merely physical but spiritual; senseless argumentation, the production of meaningless writing, an essential confusion not so much of matter as ideas, is inherent in its condition. Generations of human beings blunder in the kindred condition of the mud.

From the properties in Chancery to the confusion and proliferation of documents themselves, *Bleak House* is a novel that deals in the mystery of representations. The central suit, Jarndyce and Jarndyce, is already a point of verbal slippage. For the name is the same: two equivalent signs are thrown into opposition, but as the will itself is a dead letter, Jarndyce and Jarndyce is the nomination only of a struggle after costs, not the original cause. Thus, at every point in *Bleak House* connections proliferate and then disperse. The textuality, or the hypertextuality, of the novel emphasises this point. As it is in *Little Dorrit*, the novel is a labyrinth of links that multiply through analogy, plot, metaphor, symbol, pun, simple likenesses. Each node in *Bleak House* is pregnant with possible connections to all the other nodes. Metaphorical linkages are suggested by spatial linkages, as in the labyrinth. Metaphor slides into metonymy[57]. Krook's shop is close to the Court; Krook himself is a metaphor for the Lord Chancellor (as he is called) and his shop is analogous to

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57. For the relationship between metaphor and metonymy in the novel see Connor 60-66.

Chancery: "'You see I have so many things here... of so many kinds, and all as the neighbours think (but they know nothing), wasting and going to rack and ruin, that that's why they have given my place a christening'" (101). Andrew Sanders notes that no location in *Bleak House* is without its analogical or metaphorical resemblance to another: "The broken scales in [Krook's] shop are like those of justice, the grey cat menacingly waiting to pounce on Miss Flite's birds is to be reflected in the novel's lawyers, and the filthy detritus is echoed in the slums and in the city graveyards" (143-4). Krook's cat, in predatory intensity, resembles Vholes in his vampiric cannibalism, and Vholes himself has a glance for "the official cat who is patiently watching a mouse hole" (608) — a cat that is depicted in the accompanying illustration "Attorney and Client" where a book lying open at the side of Vholes's desk contains a picture of a labyrinth. Metaphor, then, emphasises the mystery of kindred, closing the short gap between equity, the street mud, the mud of the grave-yard and its swarming rats, the human vermin of Tom-all-Alone's who infest the property like parasites while the Chancery lawyers in turn "lie like maggots in nuts" (182) in Mr Tulkinghorn's chambers. As in the labyrinth, the multiplication of linkages is, itself, the problem, for at every point where the text suggests a link there is also a disjunction, a potential referral, as though the act of reading were to echo Jo's dilemma and be constantly "moving on," spotting the hidden connection, the clue, the analogy, that leads further and further from the centre and into increasingly unstable readings. Under the dominion of the sign of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, there may be no finality. Richard Carstone insists that "'There is truth and justice somewhere in the case'" (582), but Esther is not prepared to believe him. The mystery may be insoluble because metaphors, like clues, point only towards other metaphors.

Narrative both creates and sanctions the proliferation of metaphor. If Chancery is the centre of the fog and the mud, then approaching Chancery, the reader aims to approach some indeterminate centre, even if the narrative subsequently leads away from that centre. Despite the seeming stasis of the case, Dickens's mystery plot offers a form of enactment, or exploration, that can be seen as an internal paradigm for the act

of reading, of apprehending the environment of the text. There is, we sense, some original mystery, some interpretation that can at least show us a way of beginning to understand, some starting point of view that will offer a route to a cohesive vision. Thus, Mr Snagsby is drawn into the mystery, and his first step is to be inducted into urban mystery in the worst of its enclosures, Tom-all-Alone's. The passage resembles Dickens's journalistic piece, "On Duty with Inspector Field" (*Hunted Down* 123-36) in which the narrator is escorted into Rats's Castle, a desolate realm of crime and poverty. Mr Snagsby enters Tom-all-Alone's in the company of Mr Bucket and a policeman, the first suggestion of the possibility of the police voice that will be able to guide and discover:

> Between his two conductors, Mr Snagsby passes along the middle of a villainous street, undrained, unventilated, deep in black mud and corrupt water — though the roads are dry elsewhere — and reeking with such smells and sights that he, who has lived in London all his life, can scarce believe his senses. Branching from this street and its heaps of ruins, are other streets and courts so infamous that Mr Snagsby sickens in body and mind, and feels as if he were going, every moment deeper down, into the infernal gulf. (364)

Moving through the circles of Hell in the company of the police, Mr Snagsby traces the steps of a reader circling in the labyrinth of the text, but there is doubtless a sense of discovery here, of learning, of coming to know of a mystery that we had not been previously aware of, as Snagsby sees for the first time things he would not have believed beforehand. Dickens's urban Gothic allows the discovery of the urban invisible. Snagsby and Bucket are looking for Jo; they are looking for another connection, and in this manner the deep mystery of *Bleak House*, the connection between equity and the property in Chancery, between the mud of the streets and the undrained streets of Tom-all-Alone's, is made analogous with the pursuit of another mystery of kindred. Once within the mystery, Mr Snagsby finds his sense of reality only further strained. Robert Newsom summarises his dilemma:

> What is the matter with Mr Snagsby is what is the matter with almost everyone else in the novel — he knows that something awful and mysterious has happened and that he is somehow implicated in that mystery, but that is all. The question again is one of causes and relations, and the mystery is that like Chancery itself it seems to expand endlessly until it encompasses all experience. (71)

If it is not possible to read this mystery within the context of Chancery, then we must turn to the novel's other mystery of kindred, in the hopes that negotiating the nexus of one will lead to the explication of the other.

7.3. Esther's Connection.

In one sense, Jarndyce and Jarndyce is a family mystery, a mystery of inheritance initiated long ago by an unknown ancestor: "'A certain Jarndyce, in an evil hour, made a great will'" (145). But, under the sign of Jarndyce and Jarndyce all meaning has leeched from the suit. It has become a mystery of delay, redirection, the merits of which not even its advocates can agree upon (52). How this state of affairs came to be seems located in an irrecoverable past. It is a mystery of origins, but though the condition of the suit can be described, its causes cannot satisfactorily be narrated. It cannot be plotted because it is categorically purposeless. Nevertheless, Dickens finds a way to enact the mystery, to use the process of substitution to form a double-narrative, the story of a crime and of an investigation, within the purview of Chancery, for though the opening describes a world enclosed and static, *Bleak House* moves from this to a chapter called "A Progress," and thus to the living, narratable world of Esther Summerson. Her mystery, the mystery of her origins or her "connexions," is the mystery that *Bleak House* is able to tell out rather than tell of, and it is also a mystery of kindred, of the discovery of human kindred through all the discrete layers of a labyrinthine society.

Esther's story, broadly conceived, is the double-narrative of the mystery. She moves, along with the reader, from a state of ignorance and suspicion towards a fuller apprehension, a discovery of the state of affairs that arose even before her birth. The events that concern and revolve about her, not limited to those parts she actually writes, form the narrative of an investigation that closes, inexorably, with a potentially totalising narrative of a secret that will throw a counter-light upon itself. Dickens's earliest comment on Esther in his working notes is: "Lady Dedlock's child" (*Working*

Notes 207). Here is the groundwork for the backward construction of this narrative. The secret is inherent in his first conception of the character and her role. Esther's narrative, like that of Pip in *Great Expectations*, is a search for causes, origins, the only origins that the narrative will properly allow, and it also strives to locate blame, to discover who is guilty. Yet its totalising impulse is also outside of Esther, in that the mysteries of the opening number, which do not appear immediately to bear reference to Esther, inevitably close in on her. The entirety of Esther's progress is bound in the double-narrative which traces her "connexions."

Reading by Dickens's backward light from the knowledge of Esther's parentage, we find Dickens's mysteries of suggestion at play, for no detail is extraneous in the play of the double-narrative. A tableau which Lady Dedlock observes, and her reaction to it, is telling:

> My Lady Dedlock (who is childless), looking out in the early twilight from her boudoir at a keeper's lodge, and seeing the light of a fire upon the latticed panes, and smoke rising from the chimney, and a child, chased by a woman, running out into the rain to meet the shining figure of a wrapped-up man coming through the gate, has been put quite out of temper. (56)

If Tulkinghorn is alerted by her reaction to legal-writing, the reader should be alerted by this reaction. In both cases we detect clues, significance, resonances. However, the passage both suggests and conceals, points towards the trauma of a broken family group, and yet dismisses speculation through the parenthetical observation "who is childless." Later, we read the testimony that Nemo is "wexed and worrited by the children" (199). A suggestive analogy, therefore, has joined these characters even before the tale of the investigation is fully underway. The function of the text is to extend these suggestions, to gradually weave about the mystery a long process of implication and discovery.

The slow uncovering of Esther's connection to the Dedlock household involves a burgeoning of involvement through characters who are variously the subjects of investigation, or witnesses, decoys, intermediaries, spies, detectives both official and unofficial, and simple bystanders. From the moment Tulkinghorn notes Lady Dedlock's reaction to a fragment of writing, we are observing that elaborating process

of deviance from a norm that Brooks describes as the essence of plot (see section 1.6). For Lady Dedlock's reaction is an otherwise trivial break in her composure, but this breakage leads to the further composition of the intricate web of the investigation, opening up the dilatory territory of possibility and interpretation. Though the search has many agents it has, properly speaking, no centre. Tulkinghorn is the first to suspect, and pursues the unknown Nemo, but Lady Dedlock herself advances the investigation by guiltily examining the scenes of the life and death of her former lover. In doing so she implicates Jo, who comes to Tulkinghorn's attention via the fumbling "inkwitch," and thereafter Tulkinghorn suborns, hires or otherwise involves Inspector Bucket, Hortense, Mr George, even the Smallweed clan, in a variety of functions. Snagsby has long been party to a mystery that he cannot fathom. Yet simultaneous with Tulkinghorn's efforts are those of William Guppy. Bucket is similarly both Tulkinghorn's agent and operating on his own, while the coterie of the Smallweeds, Chadbands and Mrs Snagsby pursue their own purposes. Thus, a broad array of characters come to hold one or other strand of the mystery, but no character, not even Tulkinghorn, achieves sure possession over it. Instead, the threads of implication and action seem to propagate alarmingly, catching and constraining most of the subjects of the text. This propagation is similar to the propagation of mystery in *Our Mutual Friend*, but the development is more sustained and coherent. Each thread is less likely to collapse than it is to extend, to reach out and mediate an intricate chain of connections.

The most remarkable of these connections is that of the mystery of kindred, the connection that ultimately joins the outcast boy with the dying aristocracy, for the investigation of Esther's background leads to a series of virtual families, bound together by conceptual as well as blood ties. For Esther, her first real connection to her father is through one of these nominal ties: writing. "I always received by return of post exactly the same answer, in the same round hand; with the signature of Kenge and Carboy in another writing, which I supposed to be Mr Kenge's" (73). This writing is the same as that which Esther sees on Krook's window, "announcing that a respectable

man aged forty-five wanted engrossing or copying to execute with neatness and dispatch; Address to Nemo" (99). This is Esther's father, but what we are doing is reading a text about a character reading a kind of writing that enables a connection (between Esther and her father's handwriting). Yet this connection itself is only read back into the text, retrospectively, when we recognise the handwriting as a clue only because we now possess the knowledge of the relationship between Esther and Nemo. We are reading to solve the mystery of writing, the astounding degree to which these issues exert power over their subjects, tracing a mystery through the signs which constitute it.

Nemo's letters transform Esther's life at every point, dispatching her to London, drawing her into collision with her mother, as though they had some hidden patriarchal determinant. But Esther and Nemo are kindred in communication rather than family, even though Esther will feel a "strange sensation" (250) when next she passes the room in which her father has died. For Nemo's true kin is Jo, with whom he feels a more substantial bond:

> one cold night, when he, the boy, was shivering in a doorway near his crossing, the man turned to look at him, and came back, and, having questioned him and found that he had not a friend in the world, said, 'Neither have I. Not one!' and gave him the price of a supper and a night's lodgings. (200)

As Jo is a kind of surrogate son to Nemo, the father-mother-child triangle briefly devolves on him when Lady Dedlock visits him, rejects him, and ultimately gives him money. Esther and Jo are therefore pseudo-siblings (as well as both being outcasts), and if Esther redeems her mother's rejection of the boy by bringing him to Bleak House with the fever, she also incurs the consequences of the death of her father when she herself is infected by the disease that rises up from her father's burial-place. The illiterate Jo, though outside of the system of symbols by which society guides itself, is nevertheless able to powerfully re-intrude on that order. Jo cannot read letters, but he can read the looks of maid, lady and daughter as Tulkinghorn finalises their connection, and it may be that Esther's illness is Lady Dedlock's final spur to reveal herself to her daughter. At the same time Esther's disease enables this encounter by erasing the

physical likeness between the two women. Lady Dedlock in her turn assumes a surrogate daughter in Rosa, whom she calls "my child" and caresses with a "motherly touch" (706-7), and in trying to save this daughter from potential disgrace she precipitates the fall of the Dedlocks. Through this complex chain of symbolic kindreds, then, the familial connection extends from "the house in Lincolnshire" to "the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw" (272). All levels of society are shown to be profoundly linked through this mystery.

These linkages persist at a variety of structural and perceptual levels; that is, the mystery is mediated through such a profusion of clues, semiotic, symbolic, allegorical, physical, that the entirety of perception becomes an act of detection. The mystery of Esther's lineage invites us to trace an ever-expanding web of connections through marks, writing, contagion, the mud itself. Esther's parentage is first discovered, and then proved, through writing. Handwriting becomes, in the absence of physical connection, the indication of likeness, and the possession of letters, documents, marks kinship. Yet even physical likenesses become mediated by signs and representations, for it appears that the similarity between Lady Dedlock and Esther is construed through representations rather than physical contiguity. Many characters who see Esther and Lady Dedlock together, such as Ada Clare or John Jarndyce, miss the connection, whereas Guppy, who has met Esther only once, instantly recognises her likeness in the *portrait* of Lady Dedlock: "'Blest...! if I have ever seen her. Yet I know her! Has the picture been engraved?'" (138). Engraved: again physically removed, the copy of a portrait. The same portrait presents the Lady to her husband's eyes, but to the reader the symbolic bar of sunlight, "a broad bend-sinister of light" (204), is a literary clue to illegitimacy purely within the readerly domain, the description of an imaginary representation.

The text marks Lady Dedlock as the mother of an illegitimate child, but it is the father, the law-writer, who comes to deal in texts and their retranscription. Nemo, the assumed name, exists almost entirely in the world of the text, the report, the written. He is a presence rarely directly glimpsed but seen through intermediaries. The text

assumes a visual perspective on Nemo only once, in death: "He lies there, dressed in shirt and trousers, with bare feet" (188). Otherwise, Nemo is constructed out of reports, reminiscences, the memories of other characters, gestures like Miss Flite's pointed finger, indicating, explaining, but not revealing:

> she had made a previous stoppage on the second floor, and had silenty pointed to a dark door there.
>
> 'The only other lodger," she now whispered in explanation; 'a law-writer. The children in the lanes here, say he has sold himself to the devil.' (105-6)

The constancy of Nemo's writing seems to dissolve at last into "a wilderness marked with a rain of ink" (188), linking ink to the rain, the fog, the mud, and ultimately the grave dirt in which his body is interred, while Nemo is reconstructed again through the "inkwitch," which collates the evidence and dispatches the corpse to a shallow grave.

And from the grave Nemo returns, just as his return from the status of Nemo to Captain Hawdon resurrects transgression and guilt: "here they lower our dear brother down a foot or two: here sow him in corruption, to be raised in corruption: an avenging ghost at many a sick-bedside: a shameful testimony to future ages, how civilisation and barbarity walked this boastful island together" (202). Captain Hawdon haunts his daughter's sickbed, but the allegory of the spread of corruption is a link to Tom-all-Alone's and the transmission of sickness through society: "There is not a drop of Tom's corrupted blood but propagates infection and contagion somewhere. It shall pollute, this very night, the choice stream (in which chemists on analysis would find the genuine nobility) of a Norman house" (683). Esther and Captain Hawdon are thus implicated once again in the whole mystery of society through the exposition of this connection, an exposition mediated by an array of clues ranging from the purely symbolic to the causal to the allegorical.

Esther's connections, in whatever form, are a way of actualising and narrating mystery. They involve us in a process of reading and detection, for as a variety of detectives attempt to read Esther's secret parentage, so is the reader educated in this type of reading as a means of apprehending the text itself. The mystery of Esther's kindred shows us a world far more integrated than the dislocated world of the opening

and the Chancery suit. But, the more we discover, like Snagsby moving deeper and deeper into uncertainty, the more we are felt to be implicated, since Esther's mystery brings us to the edge of a family mystery, but by the very proliferation of its clues leads us back, inevitably, to Chancery. For, as we begin to learn how things are connected, we begin to wonder what things are further connected, and in what sense the mystery of Esther's origins can be located in the problematic of the very origin of the world. In the burial of Captain Hawdon we are drawn back again to the metaphysics of the mud, the enigma of the primordial world, of the original abuse that led to this separation and dissolution. The idea of this mystery pulls us back to the mystery suggested in the first few pages, the mystery of an entropic world fallen into apparently irreversible decay. In effect, the possibility that lesser, solvable empirical mysteries represent or enact greater metaphysical mysteries allows a two-way articulation, so that even in the solution to Esther's case we once again come to ask, how is this caught up in Chancery? Learning that Esther is the child of Captain Hawdon and Honoria Barbary, the next problem is how this mystery of kindred is of a kind with Chancery — how do we place Miss Barbary in Chancery?

7.4. Miss Barbary in Chancery.

Esther is the third Miss Barbary, after her aunt and her mother before marriage. Though as an illegitimate child any name is hers to assume, the process of the novel is not so much patrilineal as matrilineal. Esther connects with her father's legacy in a manner that is both discursive and profound; they never physically meet, and yet his death projects into and alters her life. On the other hand, the process of discovery that Esther undertakes is orientated to the mother. It is only Lady Dedlock who can embrace her child and offer any sort of explanation. Summer's-son tends towards the discovery that she is Barbary's daughter. Yet once the two sisters and the daughter are recognised as Barbarys, they are implicated, however remotely, in Jarndyce and

Jarndyce, the very involvement that Esther spends most of the novel attempting to evade,

Esther and the reader are first made aware of her inherited, matrilineal guilt: "'Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers'" (65). At the same time there is a mystery, since Esther has no knowledge of the fault, the causes of her guilt, and her instruction leads her both to remember guilt and deny or repress it: "'unfortunate girl, orphaned and degraded from the first of these evil anniversaries, pray daily that the sins of others be not visited upon your head, according to what is written. Forget your mother, and leave all other people to forget her who will do her unhappy child that greatest kindness'" (65). Yet the sin that is "written" is also the original curse of the writs in Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Similarly the text both offers and denies Esther an interest in the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Kenge explains that a share in the suit is among Miss Barbary's affairs, yet Esther has no knowledge of the suit until then. Her aunt/godmother being her "'sole relation... in fact that is; for I am bound to observe that in law you have none'" (68), Esther is introduced to the case and then denied any relationship with it, at least in law. The novel has informed us that Lady Dedlock is a party to the Chancery suit (60). If Esther were ever recognised by her mother, whom she is also connected to in fact but not in law, she would be a potential suitor to Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Yet, much like John Jarndyce, her every effort is to be outside the suit, free of its influence. The manner is which the novel teases us with these connections and then abandons them, leads us to question how Esther's search for her kindred is of a kind with the mystery of Chancery.

The question of kindred, then, can also be seen to persist within the kindred types of mystery that the novel presents. J. Hillis Miller suggests in the Penguin introduction to *Bleak House* that, "Lady Dedlock's mystery and the mystery of Chancery are so closely intertwined that the reader may be enticed into thinking that the solution of the one is the solution of the other" (34), though he denies the possibility of

such a solution being located in an "'illicit' act like fornication" (34)[58]. The same process is evident in D.A Miller's assertion that, "Of all the mysteries that will crop up in *Bleak House*, not the least instructive concerns the curious formal torsion whereby a novel dealing with a civil suit becomes a murder mystery" (60). Here the torsion described is also between Chancery and the affairs of Lady Dedlock. Because the text does seem, as Hillis Miller has it, intertwined, because the act of reading Esther's mystery involves us in the propagation of so many clues, not the least of which are legal documents in the suit of Chancery, it is not enough, as Joseph Patrick Kelly does (179), to dismiss one mystery, that of Chancery, as illegitimate, and posit Esther's as the valid mystery. Esther, despite her desire to be outside of the mystery of Chancery, is always in some way elliptically drawn towards it, just as she is both guilty and innocent, and the inquiry into the manner of the formal, structural, thematic or causal connection between the two is valid. In the sense that Esther's narrative focuses on the idea of causation, discovery, the finding out of a buried and hidden wrong, we cannot but begin to hope that some fruitful analogy with the Court of Chancery, which otherwise baffles us through its sheer verbal inertia, is possible.

Analogical structures, like those of *Our Mutual Friend*, provide a point of intercession with the plot, and can elaborate lines of influence that are in some ways like the plot. But by drawing likenesses here, by making an imaginative connection, we are involved in a poetic process. As the reader makes analogical links, we merely replicate those analogical strategies already familiar to the narratorial mode. Thus, as from very early on the narrative consciously evokes the systematic making of likenesses — "It is but a glimpse of the world of fashion that we want on this same miry afternoon. It is not so unlike the Court of Chancery that we may pass from the one scene to the other, as the crow flies" (55) — so reading comes to follow and reiterate these steps. This first transference, from Chancery to the world of fashion,

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58. For an entirely different view, however, see Nord 81-111, who argues that sexual transgression is the determining motive force of *Bleak House*: "what is merely suggested about the connections between urban blight and sexual contamination in *Dombey and Son* becomes the very machinery that drives *Bleak House*" (96).

initiates the curious torsion already described above. Our imaginative perception, then, is construed by the crow's flight, which we shall see again as a model of narrative demi-omniscience, and this poetic freedom, this making of connection and metaphor, is how we come to see, to investigate, Chancery. Therefore, the novel's mode of reading, of suggesting connection, creates a parallel and a corrective to the interpretative morass of Chancery itself. Reading the text, imagining and transforming, we selectively break a certain rule of decorum, imagine a link between the noble house and the street-sweeper, or accept a metaphor as outrageous as the third-person narrator can make it, creating an illegitimacy in language as we trace out Esther Summerson's illegitimacy in fact. Where Chancery is linguistically self-contained, trapped behind its walls of words, the very act of reading Chancery as though it contained clues to some other mystery de-isolates it, and proposes that reading artistically, that is imaginatively, is a possible corrective to its deadening babble. Transposing Esther's origins to Chancery's failures, we imagine a crime that links and explicates both, deploying the creative imagination against an entropic system.

Where then do we look for the crime that unites Esther's narrative with that of Chancery? John Jarndyce cannot give any account of the Chancery suit except that it was once a family question initiated by a will and that it now bears no resemblance to the original cause — "'It's about nothing but Costs now'" (145) — but he adds an unusual comment to his description of Tom-all-Alone's, the property that is "in Chancery." He says, "'These are the Great Seal's impressions, my dear, all over England — the children know them!'" (147). Sins against children, from the Pardiggle boys to the dead baby of the brickmakers, predominate in the chapter, "Covering a Multitude of Sins." It is John Jarndyce who observes to Skimpole, the incompetent father, that "'the universe...makes rather an indifferent parent'" (122). The process of the universe is towards dust, towards total indifference. By implication, the duty of the good parent or guardian is to resist this decay, to exercise an ordering function which is the only means by which the living being avoids dissolution, something like the chaotic order of Bleak House under Esther's care. It is

in this respect that Chancery and the other parent-figures in the novel fail. As Anne Humpherys writes: "The characters in *Bleak House* are in fact brought together by the failures of both blood families and of the institutional 'parent' Chancery" (464). It is here that the mystery of *Bleak House* again becomes a mystery of kindred; kindred because the Hawdon-Barbary pairing fails as parents, kindred because this inadequacy is shared by the surrogate parent-authority of Chancery, which exercises remote parental responsibility through the wills of absent parents. Thus, as we solve the mystery of the Hawdon-Barbary affair, by elaborating this structural connection we hope to elucidate the mystery of Chancery itself.

Gradually the text moves towards the unravelling of its hidden narrative: the relationship of Honoria Barbary and Captain Hawdon. Yet even as the connection closes, it disperses; the nearer we come to the guilty, the more remote their "crime" becomes. Though Inspector Bucket, in a model of detective procedure, is able to confront Hortense, there is no totalising narrative instant in the Barbary case. Instead, our knowledge remains partial; the entire story is dispersed in fragments of narrative requiring, of the reader and Esther alike, a work of reconstruction which is condemned never to be entirely complete. We are drawn back to reading and writing, scanning letters, acquiring texts. Esther has at least two letters at her disposal: the one given her by her mother and the note from Mr George. The reader has broader clues, the text itself, but at all points the narrative is murky. At the centre of it may indeed be what Chadband calls the "'shameful secret'" (789) of pre-marital sex. We can assume at some time an affair between Honoria Barbary and Captain Hawdon. And yet the shame of this act is so intense that the text maintains a silence about it, and tends to subsequently shift the guilt associated with it. What is emphasised instead is both Captain Hawdon's and Honoria Barbary's ignorance of subsequent events: "I had not been abandoned by my mother. Her elder and only sister, the god-mother of my childhood, discovering signs of life in me when I had been laid aside as dead, had in her stern sense of duty, with no desire or willingness that I should live, reared me in rigid secrecy" (569). Captain Hawdon, posted overseas at the time, fails to return to

England under his own identity, and probably never learns he has been a father: "he was (officially) reported drowned, and assuredly went over the side of a transport ship at night in an Irish harbour" (907-8). The two of them cannot, therefore, know of their own crime of neglect, only of the very sexual transgression that cannot be clearly enunciated. How then, aside from the impropriety of sex before marriage, are these two culpable as parents, when knowledge of their parentage is exactly what they lack? Where is the sin, when ignorance is legitimately an excuse? The nearer we come to constructing the solution, the more complex the problem of blame becomes.

In the absence of textual reconstruction, the reader is forced into speculation, analogy, the very interpetative figures that the text encourages. Yet this requires extraordinary care. We must resist closure or the temptation to read an absolute solution from a single privileged analogy, making another Droodist leap that supplies us all at once with the right answer. This danger operates both ways. On the one side a critic such as Hillis Miller can contend that "nothing lies at the origin of Jarndyce and Jarndyce but man's ability to create and administer systems of law" (Introduction 34). On the other, Gillian West, focusing on an analogy between Rick and Ada, suggests that Honoria and Hawdon broke up because of Hawdon's involvement in a Chancery Suit. If systematising is too broad a culprit, and inherently dehumanises the case, and West's contention (for which there is no textual evidence to say that Captain Hawdon did have a part in a Chancery case) is equally shaky, the text leaves us no option but to exercise a constructive readerly imagination. Even though we operate by analogy, we are not permitted to close the case by analogy.

We can imagine a young, attractive, socially ambitious Honoria Barbary in an affair with the charismatic yet dissolute Captain Hawdon. At some unjudgeable point they fail to connect; that is, they fail to cement the family unit that would have legitimised their child and the love they felt for each other. It may be that the Captain is too eager to respond to his overseas posting, or that Honoria accepts the death of her child a little too quickly, and just as quickly accedes to the proposal of the older Sir Leicester Dedlock. Perhaps the other Barbary sister is to blame, but in her coldness

and stern judgement, is she not merely a more exaggerated personality than the proud sister? For what reason does she usurp her sister's right to motherhood? And in her insistence on the damage done to her, is there not some reciprocity, as her silence cements her sister's ambitions? As a god-mother — the title itself is suggestive — she is cold and remote, but her role as guardian should be to ameliorate the indifference of the cosmos, not replicate it in her own treatment of her sister's child. This is another example of the parental failure that activates the mystery in the first place. Yet this is merely speculation. We do not have enough clues with which to reconstruct the mystery. We merely know that it is irretrievable. The text registers only an absence, a gap, at this point.

This is not to argue that the mystery is abrogated because the cause cannot be recovered, only that it will always remain to this degree unreadable, outside of interpretation. Even though imagination enables us to leap outside of Chancery to make connections that the law cannot allow, we are also confronted by a point where we must stop where Chancery cannot stop. The absence of determinable cause does not release us from causation. In the eternal paradox of guilt and innocence, Esther is permanently implicated in her parents' misdeeds, even if she is also blameless, for what *Bleak House* shows us is that the consequences of secrets, no matter how well erased, always carry into the present. One of the motifs of the novel is that of the sudden, catastrophic explosion, the release of potential energy. This ranges from the revelatory chapter, "Springing a Mine" to the collapse of a house in Tom-all-Alone's (the same phrase is used), to the sharpshooter's gallery and the explosion-battered Phil Squod, to that most terminal of all explosions, Spontaneous Combustion. The moment of discovery, the moment when the past violently reasserts itself into the present, is also the moment of destructive collapse, as it is in *Little Dorrit*, where the final exposition of the mystery is also the physical collapse of the Clennam house. In the same way, Krook burns from within in analogy to his symbolic brother, the Lord Chancellor:

> The Lord Chancellor of that Court, true to his title in his last act, has died the death of all Lord Chancellors in all Courts, and of all authorities in all places under all names soever, where false pretences are made, and where injustice is

> done. Call the death by any name your Highness will, attribute it to whom you will, or say it might be prevented how you will, it is the same death eternally — inborn, engendered in the corrupted humours of the vicious body itself, and that only — Spontaneous Combustion, and none other of all the deaths that can be died. (511-2)

No wonder, then, that Tulkinghorn dies by a pistol-shot, and that to Lady Dedlock "what was his death but the key-stone of a gloomy arch removed, and now the arch begins to fall in a thousand fragments, each crushing and mangling piecemeal!" (816). This is also the moment when mystery is the most problematic. For it is here that discovery is most closely invited and then rendered impossible; here that Esther comes closest to recognising her mother and thus closest to Chancery, to induction in the system by which the parent, whether institution or individual, fails to protect the child/ward. The consequences of the springing of the mine demand of us an acute act of synthesis, for both cases, both mysteries of kindred, are dissolved at the very moment that they become most profoundly entangled, at the moment when the solution, the confrontation with the fugitive mother or the failed system, is most imminent. And it is no coincidence that this is the moment when the novel's two modes of narration and detection, when Inspector Bucket and Esther, come closest together. It is in their resolution that the kindred mysteries of *Bleak House* reach obliquely towards synthesis.

7.5. Esther and the Detectives.

Letters, wills, instructions, notes, affidavits, bills, submissions: *Bleak House* is obsessed with the problem of evidence, of written testimony. The struggle for control in the novel is the struggle for knowledge, for the privilege to interpret. Thus, the novel's contests are about documents: the Jarndyce will, the Hawdon letters, and the discovery of each document raises the hope of some sort of definitive corroboration, as in the comparison of hand-writings by which the past can be tracked. But behind this is the fear that writing will assume a power of its own, that documentation will eventually obscure the objects that it was meant to represent: in short, that the condition

of Chancery will obtain. Marked by this impulse and this fear, then, what are we to make of the novel's two-fold narrative? In what sense are they kindred? Is it possible to see these two accounts in some way meeting with, confirming, and formally elaborating on each other? In this novel of kindred mysteries, we must also question the nature of the connection between Esther and her unknown, demi-omniscient counterpart, whose authority is similar to that of the police detective, Bucket — the mystery of Esther and the detectives.

Someone called Esther Summerson, and another that I shall call the *recorder*, since both he and Esther are after their fashion narrators, share the pages of *Bleak House.* They are aware of each other, as Esther speaks of "my portion of these pages" (62), and the recorder observes her: "While Esther sleeps, and while Esther wakes" (131). Yet how Esther's personal account, written some years after the event, and the near-omniscient narrative of the recorder come to be the one novel, *Bleak House*, cannot be understood except in terms of fictionality. Both Esther and the recorder are voices of the novelist, Charles Dickens. The novel cannot be construed in terms of its bi-vocal construction except as artifact and the conscious combination of two voices. Thus, Esther and the recorder share their fictionality, their status as constructs.

Their differences are immediately apparent. Esther is fussy, domestic, coy, less linguistically skilled, fundamentally personal, as opposed to the remote, impersonal recorder who passes with an ironic deftness through the opening passages of the novel. Esther's world is orientated towards people: "I mean all the time to write about other people," (162) she asserts sincerely, and though she notes, "I seem always to be writing about myself" (162), it is relationships which both concern and define Esther. For part of Esther's nature is that she only exists to herself when reflected in other people; even when writing about herself, she is often writing about what other people think of her. But, where Esther represents affection and emotional warmth in the novel, the narrator is not without personality. Though the third person point of view detaches the "masculine" recorder from the other characters in the novel he is, by turns, angry, sardonic, contemplative or melancholy, possessed of a range of moods and

emotions. More subtle and intriguing, then, are the differences in their modes of apprehension and their degrees of knowledge.

Esther and the narrator know, and construct knowledge, in quite different manners. In turn, they are read and interpreted differently by the reader. Esther is categorically the most limited. Her domain is that of lived experience: direct, human learning. Most alarmingly, she is also closed to inquiry, a passive learner who is content to let others, such as John Jarndyce, dole out information to her when and as they please. Esther is not naturally incurious; there is always an inward, psychological desire to know, as evidenced by the fact that, as she tells us, she almost always dreams of her godmother's house (172), a place that is connected in her thoughts with "shadowy speculations" of her "earliest history" (131). In dreams Esther returns to her origins, but her fears fend her away from a conscious search so that her instants of recognition in the presence of Lady Dedlock are always, for her, profoundly uncomfortable. In a novel of active detectives, Esther is a poor detective, and as it is for William Guppy, our efforts to tease out secrets in her favour are usually rebuffed by a gesture of defensive erasure: "'You could make no discovery in reference to me that would do me the least service, or give me the least pleasure'" (600). Esther's signs of Esther's inner self, like the tears she drops on the page, both mark the text and are carefully brushed away: "I hope it is not self-indulgent to shed these tears as I think of it.... There! I have wiped them away now, and can go on again properly" (65-6).

In as much as Esther suppresses knowledge, she is an unreliable informer. Frequently her description of others, especially the novel's hypocrites, parasites and incompetents, are couched by Esther in avowals of ignorance and confusion. Her observations are also framed in a form of irony which can occlude their acuity, since for Esther irony is often very close to false modesty, as when she observes Mr Turveydrop bestow his blessing on Caddy: "The benignity as he raised his future daughter-in-law and stretched out his hand to his son (who kissed it with affectionate respect and gratitude), was the most confusing sight I ever saw" (382). It is in her modesty, by which Esther both denigrates herself and seems, covertly, to draw

attention to her own value, that Esther is most irritating. Such a scene early in the novel is particularly overblown:

> when they took me through all the rooms that I might see them for the last time; and when some cried, 'Esther, dear, say good-bye to me here, at my bedside, where you first spoke so kindly to me!' and when others asked me only to write their names, 'With Esther's love;' and when they all surrounded me with their parting presents, and clung to me weeping, and cried, 'What shall we do when dear, dear Esther's gone!' and when I tried to tell them how forbearing, and how good they had all been to me, and how I blessed, and thanked them everyone; what a heart I had! (75).

Esther thus insists that she is universally praised without cause, but relates this praise at tedious length.

Esther's defenders have long noted that the psychology of this problem is coherent and believable[59]. For Esther, carrying the guilt of her very genesis, is "'set apart'" (65), never entirely willing to believe that the love and respect due to her as a human being is a right but rather something that must be constantly worked for and reinforced, and so she is compelled to offer up these tokens to the reader as proofs of the position that should automatically be hers. Esther's vow is to "strive as I grew up to be industrious, contented, and kind-hearted, and to do some good to some one, and win some love for myself if I could" (65). Her problem is that she can never entirely believe that she has achieved this. Thus, Esther's narrative unreliability stems, fundamentally, from her lack of knowledge of herself. The key problem for Esther's narrative is one of self-knowledge and discovery. Esther is unreliable because she does not know herself to be trustworthy, and this psychological failure stems consistently from her unknown genesis. The mystery that surrounds Esther's birth, the mystery that becomes for her a problem of self-knowledge, sustains the difficulty we have in interpreting her account of herself.

It is this self-knowledge, posed in the problem of origins, that this unreliable narrative moves towards. For, as Esther comes closer and closer to implication in the Chancery suit by recovering the identity of Miss Barbary, her orphan's inheritance, she comes closer to her originating sense of disgrace and difference. Her narrative

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59. See for example Zwerdling, Dyson, *Inimitable Dickens* 154-182, and Sadrin, "Charlotte Dickens."

develops along these weakpoints and stresses — the more Esther knows, the more dangerous knowledge is to Esther and her mother. As Esther learns, she develops as a narrator, but her style is already complex in that, because of her repressions and concealment, it is reliant on a technique of obliquity, on the sentence initiated and broken off, on hints and confusions. Thus, of Mrs Woodcourt and her discomfort: "I don't know what it was. Or at least if I do, now, I thought I did not then. Or at least — but it don't matter" (467). Esther develops a complex series of baffles for the reader. She is, as a narrator, strictly temporal, always carefully arranging events in their sequence and fending off premature revelations; in this manner she is also gaining control of the narrative, concealing and doling out information. Esther does develop her talents as a narrator through the novel. This is evident, firstly, in her growing consciousness of the temporality of her narrative position. The sophisticated symbolism of Esther's portrayal of Rick being driven on a hearse into the gathering darkness of a sunset by the vampiric lawyer Vholes (591), anticipates Rick's eventual wasting and death in Chancery. This shows Esther's growing artistic command of narrative method, but the narrative must still navigate the complex torsion between Esther, her growing self-knowledge and confidence, and her relationship with her mother.

The crisis for Esther and her contradictions is her encounter with her mother, the moment the connection between them is recognised and formalised. For Esther the result is the climax of the process of discovery and alienation on the Ghost's Walk at Chesney Wold:

> when my echoing footsteps brought it suddenly into my mind that there was a dreadful truth in the legend of the Ghost's Walk; that it was I, who was to bring calamity upon the stately house; and that my warning feet were haunting it even then. Seized with an augmented terror of myself that turned me cold, I ran from myself and everything.... (571)

Closest to discovering herself, Esther rediscovers how profoundly she is set apart by fear and guilt. Her only option is to flee from herself. There is consequently a reversion, as Esther swings across the axes of guilt and innocence: "I knew I was as innocent of my birth as a queen of hers; and that before my Heavenly Father I should

not be punished for birth, nor a queen rewarded for it" (571). The text, however, will revert once more to the iteration of Esther's search for and discovery of her mother, and it is here that Esther's developing narrative closes with that of the detectives and the detection that she has, up until then, avoided.

Bleak House is full of what J. Hillis Miller calls "unsuccessful detectives" (Introduction 20), swarming over the secret of Lady Dedlock's shame. Thus, much of the detective narrative lies outside of Esther's narrative, in the domain of the recorder, whose power over space constrained within a present-tense matrix makes him an exemplary field of observation who presents clues for decoding by the reader. From the opening, in which events and persons seem so dissociated that there is no difference between "a little mad old woman in a squeezed bonnet" — Miss Flite, of course — and "another ruined suitor, who periodically appears from Shropshire" — Gridley — and "a sallow prisoner" (51) who will never reappear in the text, the recorder gradually presents, sifts, focuses and develops the evidentiary structure of the novel. In the beginning, all information is presented as being of equal value; the signs are indistinguishable, like the creatures and objects in the mud. Everything that seems dislocated in the beginning gradually comes to assume significance. Similarly, the association of the recorder with the detective voice must also develop, though it is clear from the outset that we are dealing with a mode of apprehension that is different, perhaps fundamentally, from Esther's. For though Esther is bound to temporal sequence and can only narrate what she observes from her fixed location in space (with one exception), the recorder is free, within limits, in both dimensions.

The present-tense position of the recorder allows the recorder to manipulate time within certain bounds; thus, in the first few pages of the second chapter, the recorder is able to present Lady Dedlock in Paris, her place in town and Chesney Wold almost simultaneously, and traverse a series of swift juxtapositions between these locations. Yet because the recorder's simultaneity means that no instant in time can be shown as distinct from any other instant (they are all aspects of Now) the recorder is strangely limited in time, able to illustrate the present in all its detail, but only vaguely conscious

of sequence, and unable to know the future in the way that Esther, who is telling her story from the future, does have knowledge of forthcoming events[60]. Instead, the recorder emphasises his command over dimensions in space, literally able to follow where the crow flies: "Mr Snagsby standing at his shop-door looking up at the clouds, sees a crow who is out late, skim westward over the slice of sky belonging to Cook's Court. The crow flies straight across Chancery Lane and Lincoln's Inn Garden, into Lincoln's Inn Fields" (182). Omniscient in space yet constrained in time, the recorder at first resembles the fashionable intelligence that locates Lady Dedlock: "the fashionable intelligence — which, like the fiend, is omniscient of the past and present, but not the future" (57). This fiend represents another iteration of Dickens's Asmodean fantasy, the legitimised fictional power to observe the private workings of society without regard to spatial limitation, but limited to knowledge of past and present it can also be aligned with Chancery, which in its interminable delays submits the suitor to a condition of total uncertainty about the future: "'If you were living in an unfinished house, liable to have to roof put up or taken off — to be from top to bottom pulled down or built up.... you would find it hard to rest or settle" (579-80). It is the housekeeperly Esther, whose narrative is, after all, retrospective, and therefore allows for knowledge of the future even as Esther retains that knowledge, who allows characters to settle in definitive homes. Esther is able to order events in time, whereas the recorder presents only a conglomerate[61]. In this manner she is divided from the recorder's voice, but it is out of the Chancery aspect of the recorder that the detective aspect develops and eventually coincides with Esther.

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60. I am aware that the recorder takes up a semi-prophetic stance in his warnings of "Spontaneous Combustion" (512), or in preaching over the death-bed of Jo — "dying thus around us every day" (705) — but the warning or prediction is based on causal inference, not, properly speaking, foreknowledge.

61. The distinction between the two narrators has long persisted in terms similar to Winslow's comments that "Esther is straightforward, factual, involved, while the third-person narrator is an extravagantly fantastical yet aloof spectator" (2), echoed in Young's distinction between the "serious" (factual, direct) Esther and the "rhetorical" third-person narrator. Garret suggests their distinctiveness in terms of time and space in dividing "the inclusive spatial vision of the authorial narrator from Esther's personal temporal account" (59). In terms of their powers and limits, Goughan argues that the third-person is "essentially critical," exposing the blank in the centre of the system that is represented by Esther's "individualized imagination" (80). Thus, they represent two experiences, the objective and the personal, "but also two ways of imagining the world that call forth and depend on each other" (82). Whatever their respective limitations, I am inclined to concur with this last point.

We are obliged to associate the Asmodean fantasy with mystery, since it is its power to invade the domestic scene and to reveal the secrets contained there that renders it with a certain fascination. But invasive knowledge of households is virtually the exclusive domain of Tulkinghorn, an initiate, like Jaggers or Mrs Clennam, whose ambiguous powers can be shown to reside in his mastery of secrets.

> He is surrounded by a mysterious halo of family confidences; of which he is known to be the silent depository. There are noble Mausoleums rooted for the centuries in retired glades of parks, among the growing timber and fern, which perhaps hold fewer noble secrets that walk abroad among men, shut up in the breast of Mr Tulkinghorn. (58)

Mr Tulkinghorn is irrevocably a Chancery lawyer. Even in threatening Lady Dedlock, his demand is that she do nothing to compromise her secret. He exhibits no desire, and no power, outside of the power of knowledge. It is as his agent that we first encounter Inspector Bucket, materialising like the fiend of the fashionable intelligence itself: "Mr Snagsby is dismayed to see, standing with an attentive face between himself and the lawyer, at a little distance from the table, a person with a hat and stick in his hand, who was not there when he came in, and has not entered by the door or by either of the windows" (361). Bucket is always marked by his association with Tulkinghorn, and his structural connection with the legalistic devices of Chancery. For the police force, and the problematic of knowledge, is, like mystery itself, bound up in the expression of fear, a tension between the invasive processes of knowledge and urban control, and the integrity of the individual. We can never be entirely comfortable with Bucket as he relentlessly orders Jo to "move on" partly to obscure the tracks of the investigation that Tulkinghorn pursues, or arrests Gridley, or charms the Bagnet family in order to quietly detain Mr George. Just as the mystery of an urban installation demands the control of Bucket and his police officers, the mastery that they assert and the facts that they command formulate unease in the middle-class subject, such as Snagsby, who comes to perceive them. Yet despite his implication in Tulkinghorn's system of secrets and repression, the two develop a kind of logic of interpretation that moves apart, for whereas Tulkinghorn ends up entirely silenced, Bucket assumes a wider and wider

control over the text. As Bucket is detached from Tulkinghorn, so the voice of the recorder gradually moves from identification with Chancery to Inspector Bucket.

Jo's terrified avowal of Mr Bucket that "He's in all manner of places, all at wunst" (690), aligns Bucket with the recording voice, since it identifies his control over space and his singularity in time. And thus there are Bucket's demonic powers, his hypnotic finger, his near immanence: "Time and place cannot bind Mr Bucket. Like man in the abstract, he is here today and gone tomorrow — but, very unlike man indeed, he is here again the next day" (769). Steadily, Bucket approaches identification with the voice of the recorder as his command over the mystery extends until the point where his case, which is almost identical with the denouement of the novel, is complete, and lesser detectives are steadily unmasked and pushed aside: "'I am damned if I am a-going to have my case spoilt, or interfered with, or anticipated by so much as half a second of time, by any human being in creation'" (787). At his triumph, Hortense calls him "'a Devil'" (795). And so he ascends:

> There, he mounts a high tower in his mind, and looks out far and wide. Many solitary figures he perceives, creeping through the streets; many solitary figures out on heaths, and roads, and lying under haystacks. But the figure he seeks is not among them, Other solitaries he perceives in nooks of bridges, looking over; and in shadowed places down by the river's level; and a dark, dark shapeless object drifting with the tide, more solitary than all, clings with a drowning hold on his attention. (824)

Here, Bucket's breadth of vision, his mastery of the urban scene, the rivers and bridges, his knowledge of all figures moving within them, equates him with the recorder. His perception is virtually limitless, simultaneous and comprehensive, an immediate imaginitive closure with the subjects of the city that recreates narratorial omniscience. But his moment of triumph is also his failure. The one object that he seeks, despite the comprehensiveness of his vision, is invisible to him. Bucket therefore turns to Esther, and the two modes of narrative achieve fusion.

Naturally it is Bucket who seeks out Esther, who exercises his superior knowledge to engage her in the crisis, but Bucket's role has already altered. After the death of Tulkinghorn he is more and more an independent agent who asserts his initiate's will-to-knowledge in a manner that is profoundly different from the lawyer's.

As he assures Sir Leicester: "'let me beg you not to trouble your mind, for a moment, as to anything having come to *my* knowledge. I know so much about so many characters, high and low, that a piece of information, more or less, don't signify a straw" (782). Thereafter Bucket solves the Tulkinghorn murder and arranges for the buying up and suppression of the incriminating papers. Observing Hortense's letter-writing, taking back the letters, even matching the wadding from the pistol shot, Bucket takes control of the text and its scattered clues, collating them and presenting an intelligible whole. Putting texts and papers together, he replicates the process by which the reader sees his own account beside that of Esther Summerson. Despite his powers, though, he is not able to contain the crisis. Lady Dedlock is forewarned and flees. Thereafter, Bucket's goal is entirely different, for rather than being charged with the legalistic duties of investigation, proof and arrest, his is a mission of compassion. His interpretative powers are turned to the text of Sir Leicester's instructions: "Sir Leicester writes upon the slate. 'Full forgiveness. Find —'" (820). The message of forgiveness, which is incomplete until Bucket perceives it, transcends the ascription of guilt that is the function of the law and Chancery, and for the first time it may be that the doctrine of forgiveness rather than judgement can offer a counter-weight to the inert mass of the institution, a correction to the debilitating discourse of transgression, legal judgement and punishment. Bucket is still wielding his detective powers; his first step is to search Lady Dedlock's chambers, where his clue is Esther's handkerchief. Yet once the detective has stepped outside of his institutional role, his powers and his authority are no longer equal to the task. He needs Esther to fundamentally personalise what he is about to undertake, as it is only her unique subjective presence that will allow him to complete his mission of redemption:

> 'If I follow her alone, she, being in ignorance of what Sir Leicester Dedlock, baronet, has communicated to me, may be driven to desperation. But if I follow her in the company of a young lady that she has a tenderness for — I ask no questions, and I say no more than that — she will give me credit for being friendly.' (823)

The detective voice can only communicate its message in the company of the personal, and so the narrative is delivered over to Esther.

Esther, like Snagsby before her, must now undergo her descent into the underworld of the urban scene. Her journey with Inspector Bucket is firstly her immersion in urban mystery, in those fearful enclosures that are primarily represented in the novel by Tom-all-Alone's, but are ubiquitously the scene of the repressed, the secretive, the unutterable. Thus, Esther's experiences are oblique, expressed in terms of the labyrinth and a series of discrete, dreamlike impressions:

> I was far from sure that I was not in a dream. We rattled with great rapidity through such a labyrinth of streets, that I soon lost all idea where we were; except that we had crossed and re-crossed the river, and still seemed to be traversing a low-lying, waterside, dense neighbourhood of narrow thoroughfares, chequered by docks and basins, high piles of warehouses, swing-bridges, and masts of ships. (827)

It is in this dreamlike scene that the terror of guilt, shame and the dissolution of the self finds expression in the bill: "'FOUND DROWNED'" (827), which evidences not only Esther's fear for her mother but the corrosive blurring of objects in the opening of the novel. The bill reminds us also of the drowned men of *Our Mutual Friend*, the obscure powers of the river, while the "labyrinth of streets," and later "the deeper complication of such streets" (858), recall the urban mazes of *Little Dorrit*. The London that Esther sees, then, is the London of urban mystery, oppressive, dreamlike, indistinct: "The river had a fearful look, so overcast and secret, creeping away so fast between the low flat lines of shore: so heavy with indistinct and awful shapes, both of substance and shadow: so death-like and mysterious" (828). The kindred mystery of Chancery has here formally connected, through the images of shadows, fog and obscurity, with Esther's quest.

In questing for her mother, in replaying the process of search and recovery, the narrative gropes towards resolution. Though the mystery is formally solved, its consequences, like the mystery of Chancery, are not, and so this burst of detective activity suggests that Esther is finally drawn towards some definitive confrontation between herself, her repressed self, and the mother who also represents every absent or failed parent in the novel. Esther's narrative is taut and powerful, without her usual obliquity. She has matured as a writer, and this is not necessarily Dickens's

intervention. Esther is able to show her inner strength and persistence; she is patient and remarkably enduring. As Bucket observes: "'I never see a young woman in any station of society — and I've seen many elevated ones too — conduct herself like you have conducted yourself, since you was called out of your bed. You're a pattern, you know" (857). And for the first time, Esther must take the initiative. She acts the detective with the brickmakers' wives, pressing them with questions. Asking after her mother, she finally implicates herself, takes responsibility for the connection, even to the point of ordering Bucket in these imperatives: "'You will not desert this lady we are in search of; you will not abandon her on such a night, and in such a state of mind as I know her to be in!'" (841). Esther has become her own detective as the narrative moves towards connection with the mother, and this act of discovery is her moment of maturity.

The narrative, after the delay of the false trail, gravitates towards its centre: the graveyard that is the final locus of dissolution, the true heart of the fog where all things tend towards death. Lady Dedlock, and Esther following, touch briefly with Snagsby, the sole remaining link with Nemo, and then proceed to Hawdon's grave. For Esther, both the physical and the psychological seem to lose their definition, for this is the point of maximum crisis where all things become mysteries of kindred simply because mysteries are no longer divisible:

> I have the most confused impression of that walk. I recollect that it was neither night nor day; that morning was dawning, but the street-lamps were not yet put out; that the sleet was still falling, and that all the streets were deep with it.... I recollect the wet house-tops, the clogged and bursting gutters and water-spouts, the narrowness of the courts by which we went. At the same time I remember... that the stained house-fronts put on human shapes and looked at me; that great water gates seemed to be opening and closing in my head, or in the air; and that unreal things were more substantial than the real. (867)

This breaking and confusion of categories is, however, different from the static waters lying in flood around Chesney Wold (56), and the thaw, the opening of water gates in Esther's mind, contradicts the "freezing mood" (57) of Lady Dedlock, for the catastrophe is also potentially a transformation.

That transformation is never to be entirely realised. Bucket, for all his mastery, has come too late. Esther has come too late. As Esther sees Lady Dedlock lying in the mud — "drenched in a fearful wet of such a place, which oozed and splashed down everything" (868) — which is kindred to law and equity, she sees, through an analogous dissociation which is similar to every other connection which proliferates through the novel, "the mother of the dead child" (868). In this phrase Esther recognises the complex of the mother of the child, herself, who had been better not born, and at the same time allows the guilty mother to die in order to requite the sins of the guiltless child. Unable to consciously accept what she knows, even language becomes meaningless: "They changed clothes in the cottage. I could repeat the words in my mind, and I knew what they meant of themselves; but I attached no meaning to them in any other connexion" (868). Thus Esther moves to the woman she convinces herself is Jenny still searching for a clue, the means to complete the quest, a further point of intercession with the mystery: "She lay there, who had so lately spoken to my mother.... She who had brought my mother's letter, who could give me the only clue to where my mother was; she, who was to guide us to rescue and save her" (868). The mystery will not be solved; there will be no final confession from Lady Dedlock that will explain the crimes of an irremediable past. Bucket and Esther have located the mother on the edge of the gate, on the threshold of the irrecoverable loss of all meaning, but the solution is here circumscribed. Neither they, nor narrative, can pursue the mystery any further.

Bucket and Esther, though able to briefly unify the novel's modes of perception, to bring the institutional and the personal into complementary rather than supplementary relationship, do not definitively succeed, but find that mystery dissipates even as they approach closest to it. Thereafter, Bucket is able to retrieve the final will in Jarndyce and Jarndyce, and Esther is permitted, perilously, to imagine that the suit may eventually end well. But Jarndyce and Jarndyce will exhaust itself and the papers in the suit will be thrown into the street, finally equated with the mud, and Esther's new world can only begin in the aftermath of the death of Richard Carstone, where the cost

of freedom is removal from London and its urban labyrinth. Ludmilla Torgovnick, among others, finds a resurgence of the old Esther's voice in the last chapters of *Bleak House*, in Esther's "sentimental performance" (53). It is true that Esther wins exculpation but is denied ultimate self-realisation. She will always be fundamentally dependent on others for her own sense of self-worth, but when John Jarndyce hands her over to Allan Woodcourt we should not be too shocked or surprised. Duty, service, faith, human connection have always been emphasised by the novel in opposition to the treacherous categories of Chancery. Esther's dilemma is that self denial and duty are opposed to her own satisfaction as a human being, but Dickens can only overcome this through the intervention of the equally self-denying John Jarndyce (whose selflessness indicates that he is a good guardian), so that Esther can paradoxically attend to her duty and be freed too. In avoiding marriage to an older, protective man and the sacrifice of youthful passion, Esther makes a substantive break with the legacy of her mother. She avoids unconsciously recreating the same triangle — woman (Esther/Honoria Barbary), lover (Woodcourt/Hawdon) and older husband (John Jarndyce/Leicester Dedlock) — that led to her mother's misery and guilt. The mystery is that we will never learn exactly how Honoria Dedlock failed where her daughter succeeded. But Esther is not always coy about her desires, merely subtle. At the height of her search for her mother, she reaches sincerely for Allan: "'Don't leave me now!'" (897) she cries, and in this dream-quest, the slightest impulse is definitive. Earlier on, the only time Esther's narrative has ever shifted from herself has been to narrate Woodcourt's visit to Richard (745-9) — this is a telling hint, an intimate insight from a future husband, could we but read it.

Esther has always narrated her self obliquely, inviting us, like John Jarndyce, to know her better than she knows herself. Her last utterance hovers on this same coyness, this half-realised knowledge:

> I did not know that; I am not certain I know it now. But I know that my dearest little pets are very pretty, and that my darling is very beautiful, and that my husband is very handsome, and that my guardian has the brightest and most benevolent face that was ever seen; and that they can very well do without much beauty in me — even supposing —.

Breaking off, Esther delays discovery, terminating *Bleak House* in eternal supposition. This ambigious narrative gesture is suggestive in terms of the novel's fascination with issues of secrecy and knowledge. Ultimately, the reader cannot know whether Esther has regained her former looks, or merely demurs to the flattery of a loving family. She keeps a truth from the reader, retaining a little fragment of a secret which refers directly to the complex clue of her appearance. For Esther, this is a kind of self-possession, since she exercises here a knowledge and mastery over this mystery, the secret of her appearance, holding in potentiality an unknown, ending with an enigmatic symbol that asserts her own control over narrative and subjectivity. In breaking off her last sentence equivocally, Esther claims the narrator's power of revelation and denial, that mystery of predication identified by Todorov. Yet this also hints at the mystery that cannot be narrated, at what we find where we cannot learn anything more. Thus, though Esther possesses the secret of her appearance this is only, as it were, her apparent subjectivity, for though Esther can here independently maintain her sense of who she is, in terms of her looks and her relationships, she has also learnt that there are limits to what we can know, even of ourselves. Thus, Esther's sentimental stance will always persist as a blind between herself and the reader, since Esther has learnt, as the reader must, that some secrets, some inner traumas, will always remain unresolved.

7.6. Ending *Bleak House*.

Bleak House is often regarded as the first of Dickens's fully realised mystery novels, containing the first detective in English literature. Its founding mystery is, typically of the "mysteries" novel, the mystery of an institution, the problem as to how equity came to be as dense and confused as the street mud, yet this mystery is insoluble in so far as the novel is irrevocably haunted by the certainty of entropy, decay and silence. At this point, then, we must investigate how human beings came to be inmates of Chancery, how we acceded to this condition, and this mystery finds its kindred condition in the unravelling of Esther Summerson's origins. Having sought out the

locus of this human failure, we find it suggestive and unsatisfying. Both Chancery and Lady Dedlock and her Captain Hawdon are bad parents who fail in some way to protect their wards and children, but the point where they sinned, the true story of their wrongdoing, is always partially hidden from us, disguised through clues, resemblances, documents, fragments, even as the consequences of their actions persist. *Bleak House* then, invites us to solve the mysteries of kindred, and to reach a connection between its two modes of narrative, Esther and the recorder. As Esther matures, and draws closer to the secret of her guilty-guiltless state, Inspector Bucket comes to speak more and more as the police voice of the third-person recorder. Yet Bucket alone cannot turn the institution he represents into an instrument of forgiveness, and Esther cannot assert the necessary mastery over the urban labyrinth, until the two are united in their final quest. That that quest fails does not mean that detection is impossible, only that it is circumscribed by mystery. In its resistance to a definitive reading, *Bleak House* is radically a mystery narrative. Esther will always in some way be guilty before the reader, liable to mis-interpretation, dispersed through clues, marks, distortions, carried away to the other Bleak House, as reading itself is. Her last equivocal gesture which ends the novel, secures its incompletion and invites us back into interpretation, is a suitable end to Dickens's most mysterious novel.

8. By a Backward Light.

'Have you nearly concluded your argument?'
'Mlud, no — variety of points — feel it my duty tsubmit — ludship....'

— *Bleak House.*

8.1. "I expect you're all wondering why I called you here...."

We are all familiar with the drawing-room scene in which the detective gathers the suspects and proceeds to outline the solution, effortlessly contextualising the clues and the events of the past in a seamless explanation that accounts, retrospectively, for the whole of the enigma. The veracity of this solution is always guaranteed for the detective by the author. Reading Dickens, reading literature at all, we have no such assurances, and thus I have so far examined my chosen texts backwards in order to foreground and expose this very practise as it applies both to the making of these fictions and their analysis. I will now present the texts with which I have worked in their original order, but any conclusions that I present here grow out of my retrospective methodology, out of a consistently applied examination of each individual text — bringing a terminology and a focus but not a teleology to each reading — and not out of a reading or a conclusion or a notion of Dickens's development that was held to be self-evident when I began. Having already outlined and applied some terminology connected with the typical form of the mystery text, including ideas of the double-narrative, substitution, secularisation and the initiate, I will not, in this conclusion, rehearse this terminology. Nor do I intend to police these texts themselves, to reconstruct them according to some predetermined end that was somehow prior to the formulation of my argument, producing — at the very last — a conclusive Holmesian "solution" that had been in mind all along, and thus subtly informing the detective-critic's choice of materials, though the inescapable focus of my reading, the main weight of interest, will be obvious enough. This bias, towards those plots of mystery and adventure that are traditionally considered outside of serious criticism is, I

hope, both informative and correctional. That is, it is my position that the elements of mystery in Dickens's work are not just populist gestures towards suspense and adventure, lending themselves to those mechanical aspects of plot with which Dickens is traditionally thought of as being somewhat unconcerned, but an essential facet of his artistry and technique. My readings will show that Dickens's mysteries are inextricably linked with his deepest meanings, that they resonate with and inform the profoundest structures of his novels. Finally, the suspense, mystery and detection with which Dickens constructed his plots are not extraneous to academic criticism but should become an integral part of it. Dickens's novels from *Bleak House* to *Edwin Drood*, demonstrate his engagement with mystery in a complex mediating space where the Gothic novel, the novel of urban mysteries, Sensation fiction and ultimately detective fiction all exert their influence. I am not trying to claim any one Dickens novel exclusively for any of these genres, but with Dickens the master populist, where we find these genres fused in the ferocious cauldron of his imagination, I believe it is not possible to be conscious of the fullness of his achievement without acknowledging these influences.

Initially, I have tried to locate Dickens and mystery in the context of Victorian culture. Many of the issues involved, such as urban mystery and the mysteries of the mind, arise out of Dickens's intense personal interests, the impulses of his imagination, and the intellectual and commercial demands of the nineteenth century. Mystery, once removed from the singular iteration of the divine will, becomes secularised and thus fragmentary. Under the heading of urban mystery we may loosely group some of these fragments: mysteries of the law, mysteries of crime, mysteries of urban institutions, of commerce and authority, mysteries of freedom and surveillance, mysteries of paperwork. In a related complex we might place mysteries of the mind, mysteries of the criminal self, mysteries of inheritance, identity and origins. The process of substitution constitutes all of these mysteries as narrative, but in Dickens this does not mean that the divine is erased by secular mystery, merely displaced and, of necessity, reconstituted. Thus, in Dickens, there is still room for providential narratives and

providential resolutions, even in his last work, but providence must now share its space with secular mysteries, with institutions and psychologies. It is only later, when detective fiction became fully secular, that the law, the policemen, the detective, the crime and the criminal became self sufficient, and the country-house murder the ethical theatre for a purified game of transgression and discovery. This study is primarily concerned with narrative, not socio-economic commentary, but these readings will indicate something of the links to the novel of urban mysteries, the Gothic novel, Sensation fiction and detective fiction. Clearly, Dickens was influenced by the urban mysteries that first appeared the 1840s, themselves a development of the old strand of Gothic fiction and the Newgate novel. In the 60s, the trace of Sensation fiction is also noticeable, where Dickens's last work demonstrates the stirrings of detective fiction proper.

Progressively, then, though mystery and the particular form of its narrative, the double-narrative, is always at play, Dickens moves from the experience of urban mystery orchestrated through defined institutions to a gradual integration of these mysteries with mysteries of the mind, criminality and psychology, finally focusing on the mysteries of psychology alone in *Edwin Drood.* The portrayal of urban mystery is always that of dispersal and fragmentation, and this is especially evident in Dickens's longer, multi-plotted novels, *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit* and *Our Mutual Friend.* In his shorter works he tends to achieve a greater focus in terms of plot, though there are still dense resonances of structure, such as the skein of clues in *Great Expectations*. Only in *Edwin Drood* did this singularity of plot and attention to psychology find an absolute coherence, as the crime plot came to concentrate around the one mysterious mind. As I observed at the outset, however, *Edwin Drood* is by no means to be thought of as the natural conclusion of a process, but as a point on a continuum where Dickens's work was arbitrarily terminated. Therefore I will attempt to show by a backward light not what everything has been working towards, since I doubt whether such determinism is feasible or admissible, but to show how the strands and concerns I have dealt with

individually reveal some pattern and consistency in Dickens's work that affirms throughout the importance and value of reading for mystery.

8.2. *Bleak House*: Police and Lawyers.

Bleak House is often commented on as the first English novel to present a developed portrait of a police detective in Mr Bucket, and by this same token it is widely seen as a precursor to the genre of detective fiction, in which Bucket's solution to the Tulkinghorn murder is an early paradigmatic example of the detective's solution in miniature[62]. There are crimes and criminals enough in Dickens's work before *Bleak House*, notably in *Barnaby Rudge*, *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Oliver Twist*, but *Bleak House* comes after Dickens's first journalistic sketches of the new detective force, after the novel of urban mysteries, and ushers in the period generally known as the "darker Dickens." It is also the first novel with a mystery plot for which Dickens maintained detailed number plans. Yet there is, otherwise, an ambivalence about the status of the novel in the canon of detective fiction, evidenced by Dickens's variable status as both an early master of the genre and a lackadaisical plotter. This ambivalence arises out of a certain misapprehension of the status of Dickensian mystery. *Bleak House* is influenced by the fictions of urban mysteries, and it is in the multiplicity of its mysteries that *Bleak House* is something more than merely a preliminary attempt at the genre of detection, just as the notion of mystery itself is prior to detection. The novel's first word, a sentence in itself, names the dominant site of its narrative concerns: London. As the industrial cities experienced unprecedented growth in the nineteenth century, they were both familiar and romantic; a material fact to their multiplying inhabitants and an enigma in terms of their true nature and constitution. Thus, the popular newspaper romances, *Les Mysteres de Paris* (1842-3) and *The Mysteries of London* (1844-8), sought new means by which to narrate daily experience. In Dickens's *Bleak House*,

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62. Bucket's solution is tidily excerpted in *Hunted Down* 148-173 as an exemplary detective's explanation.

the centre of London is Chancery, and Chancery itself is the topological locus of densely entwined mysteries, the heart of the fog, the site of administration for ruined houses and wasted streets, and the sign of an unresolvable cause.

Chancery represents an attempt at human order in a world that can no longer appeal directly to divine providence. It is a secular mystery, the site of decay and slippage into incoherence; its textual and verbal productions are at one with the noxious mud that infests the streets that surround it. I have described this as a mystery of kindred between Equity and the street mud, and it is this very step of making an equivalence, of creating a mystery or enigma that can be read in its context as leading to or elaborating on a deeper enigma, that I have called the process of substitution. Everywhere in *Bleak House*, through the kindred mysteries that depend from it, characters and readers seek some solution to the mysteries of Chancery, some understanding of the state of decay of the city. The institution of Chancery is the issue here, the source of uncertainty, delay, wiglomeration, diffused through no singular crime and no singular human agency. Yet narrative must find some cause, some link between the institution and the self, and this is discovered in the story of Esther Summerson and her own kindred mystery, a mystery of kindred, the search for her origins, which can become at the same time a surrogate quest for the origins of the world. This mystery produces the curious transference of *Bleak House*, the shift between an aimless contest over wills to the search for an absent parent and, ultimately, a murder mystery. Out of the pressure of this transformation comes another curious transformation, the increasing prominence of Inspector Bucket, who asserts his mastery, his powers of perception, over London and Chancery.

The policeman who understands the city is able to create an immediate, visual perspective, to mount the high tower in his mind, to see, and thereby becomes identified with the recorder, the impersonal third-person voice of *Bleak House*. His textual counterpart is Esther Summerson. Esther, though a passive investigator, is also able to solve a crime, or at least recognise a connection, one of the connections that the text continually encourages us to make. These two narrators working in conjunction

demonstrate the possibilities of a kind of textual corroboration, and towards the end of the novel their collaboration seems to be also the last chance to find a solution. The mystery that Esther and Bucket seek to solve is not that simply of a murder but of the absent parent, the failed guardian, the gap that indicates the loss of order in an indifferent universe. Esther and Bucket succeed and fail: they find the mother, but cannot reach Lady Dedlock in time to keep her alive and so win an explanation. Their final journey through the labyrinth of London streets traces out the possibilities and limits of knowledge in a mysterious world. Certainly, something can be found out, in the lines of kindred that either connect the outcast child Jo to Sir Leicester Dedlock, or Esther to her own parentage and her original sense of guilt. Detection is partially successful, certainly necessary, but mystery also imposes its limits, and some cases, like Jarndyce and Jarndyce, have no resolution. Esther wins a degree of self-knowledge but no complete freedom from her own sense of her lack of worthiness, and thus her final opaque gesture terminates a novel of troubling and ineradicable mysteries.

Dickens's next novel, *Hard Times*, though it includes a crime, is more concerned with the polemic it involves than the development of a mystery plot. The crime in *Hard Times* does not produce a strong sense of mystery since we are never in any doubt as to who is guilty. Nor is it central to the overall constuction of the novel, and so Dickens's mystery technique, in this unusually constrained novel, is of marginal interest. Finally, it is not set in that quintessential city of urban mystery, London. Thus, *Hard Times* is passed over by this study.

8.3. *Little Dorrit:* From Courts to Prisons.

In *Little Dorrit* Chancery gives way to the Circumlocution Office. Both institutions, however, are determined by two contradictory imperatives: administration and delay. The endless legalistic verbiage of Jarndyce and Jarndyce is metamorphosed into the circulating paperwork of the Circumlocution Office. As entities, Chancery and

the Circumlocution Office deal with and represent urban mystery. The urban world of *Little Dorrit*, like that of *Bleak House*, is constituted as a labyrinth, experienced as a confusing mass of spatial and temporal disjunctions; indeed, in *Little Dorrit* the very labyrinth of the world is figured and described by a text that is itself labyrinthine, and therefore described by the hypertext. The city as maze in a world of strange connections and meetings is delineated by the journeys of characters in the novel as maze. After concentrating on the Court of Chancery, in *Little Dorrit* Dickens shifts his attention to the prison, where imprisonment is dimly imagined as the consequence of secrecy and repression. Furthermore, the urban scene itself is rendered in terms of impenetrable secrecy, described as a "wilderness of secrets" (597) haunted by misery and deception.

It is in this setting, where the Clennam home — part ruin, part maze, part prison and part Gothic haunted house — is rendered as a nexus of these themes, that a mystery is pursued, firstly by Arthur Clennam, whose search for answers is a quest to reveal something of the hidden guilt he suspects surrounds him but cannot confirm. His subject is his erstwhile mother, who is imprisoned in her house as she is imprisoned in the darkness of her own mind and personality. In the character of Mrs Clennam we note the collision of commerce and faith, the compounding of spiritual and financial debt, that shapes Dickens's vision of secularised urban mystery. Yet her hieratic obstinacy also evokes the status of the initiate that we have already observed in the character of Tulkinghorn in *Bleak House*. That is, her power is determined by secrecy, and therefore subject to its ambiguities and contradictions. Sanctioned to act upon the authority of the secrets she commands and conceals, she is yet constrained by their unutterability, the one fact that secures their status as secrets. Her counterpart is the criminal fraudster, Mr Merdle, whose silence and suicide, his gesture of self arrest, are equally the consequences of the initiate's dilemma. Both characters — Mrs Clennam through her presumption and Mr Merdle through his admirers and flunkeys — usurp the position of the deity. Yet the text will work towards their exposure. From Pancks and Rugg to Arthur and Rigaud, there are also detective acolytes who

challenge the initiates by attempting to read their self-imposed inscrutability. They connect with a line of detectives that extends back to the swarming unsuccessful detectives of *Bleak House*. Arthur Clennam in particular is a sensitive, assiduous and persistent detective. Seeking the resolution of his doubts and suspicions, probing the past and always alert to the flicker of the repressed, he resembles the reader, also reaching for orientation in a destabilising text.

We therefore seek, through the complex Gothic family plot of the Clennams, an analysis of the relationship between the imprisoned self and authority in the implication that either Mrs Clennam, or the Circumlocution Office, is responsible for the imprisonment of the Dorrits. The plot leads us, in typical Dickensian fashion, to the resolution, an explosive catastrophe where the crime, the disinheritance of Little Dorrit, points to the intersection between her and Mrs Clennam, the contrast between forgiveness and judgement, virtue and pride. Here, as Little Dorrit, like Physician, is cast in the role of Christ-like redeemer, we see the city redeemed from its prison status by a providential transformation. This is only a glimpse of an immanent order in a circumscribed secular world, where mortal understanding is not an escape from the prison of experience but merely an acceptance of it. Perhaps to emphasise this, Arthur Clennam, the detective figure, never learns within the text the details of the crime he has been seeking. His failure to find out for himself the facts of his past is unusual, especially as the reader comes to know what he does not. No other character who acts as a detective as he does is left quite so much in the dark as he is. This helps define the limitations of action in a world where we see society, in the actions of Fanny Dorrit or the triumphant survival of Mrs Merdle, likely to proceed much as it has before. The world may be redeemed from its prison status only temporarily, and understanding of the prison leads only to a conditional, limited freedom.

8.4. *A Tale of Two Cities*: Prisoners and Tribunal.

A Tale of Two Cities departs significantly from *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*. It is shorter in construction and closely plotted, and its setting is historical, divided between Paris and London. Nevertheless, its historical background can also be seen as turning to contemporary concerns, the fear of revolution and urban chaos, just as its plot gives focus to problems of secrecy and mystery, linking these themes with Dickens's examination of the Revolution. There is, in *A Tale of Two Cities*, no contemporary institution, such as the Circumlocution Office or Chancery, to focus its urban mysteries. Instead, at first *A Tale of Two Cities* deals with individual mysteries, the mysteries of the mind and personality, though these mysteries are linked to the narrator's contemplation of the darkened, enigmatic houses of a city at night. Yet the mysteries buried in the mind of Alexandre Manette are eventually excavated and exposed by the plot, and publicised by the Revolutionary Tribunal, and this forced confession describes the crimes of a single family that stand for the national crimes of the entire aristocracy. Thus, the double-narrative typical of the mystery text, the narrative of a crime and the investigation and discovery of a crime, serves to expose the mind of the prisoner and the crimes of the state, joining mystery and history.

And yet, perhaps reproducing the anxieties we feel about Tulkinghorn, or even Inspector Bucket, in that their investigatory powers are always potentially oppressive, the Tribunal is shown to be a corrupt and vicious organisation, even as its powers to read and label the inhabitants of the city and reveal their subjectivity to public scrutiny resemble the powers of narrative itself: Dickens's ideal of an observing shadow, the Asmodean fantasy evident in Inspector Bucket's demonic abilities. The court, as in *Bleak House* or *Great Expectations*, is a kind of theatre for issues of knowledge, control, surveillance and authority. When the secret text of Manette's testimony is examined by the court, we are forced to see this as another type of reading, with all that this implies. A mystery that is radically exposed leaves no room for a personal self; the detective's mastery becomes oppression. Confirming this, Madame Defarge, knitting,

coding, and thereby entwining the past in an immutable judgement that abrogates to itself the authority of the Last Judgement, is an initiate whose every gesture is a condemnation. Her knowledge, inflexibly applied outside of the processes of natural time, destroys human subjectivities, culminating in the ultimate violence of the examining body, the guillotine.

In *A Tale of Two Cities* then, possibly because of its very removal from the immediate, Dickens is able to analyse these anxieties. His response is, through an inward, personal gesture, such as the protective mental withdrawal of the prisoner or the private embrace between Charles and Lucie, to recreate the individualised self through the secretive Sydney Carton. Carton, acting out the desperate secret of his love for Lucie Darnay, is able to master the city and the Revolution, observing the mysterious city and penetrating the district of Saint Antoine. Carton, the secular man with an unknown spiritual disability, substitutes his love for the redemptive suffering of Christ. His action enables new narratives. Paradoxically, his gesture, which prefigures the timeless, enables a return to stories, narratable events. His vision of the transformed city of Paris is borne out of a new mode of the creative imagination, a humane yet respectful "solemn interest" (343), which reconstitutes for narrative the necessary distance between the known and the unknown. Individual mystery, analysed and dispersed by the Tribunal, is once again recreated by the mysteries of the mind of Sydney Carton.

8.5. *Great Expectations*: Convicts and Gentlemen.

Great Expectations, like *A Tale of Two Cities*, is shorter than the multi-plotted mysteries novels of the 1850's and tightly plotted. It is, however, rarely openly praised for being a "tale of mystery and adventure" that deals with the "secrets of a yearning heart," as it was by an early reviewer (*Athenaeum* 43-4). The mystery of *Great Expectations* is intimately entangled in its theme, the problem of inheritance and legitimacy, for Pip is the subject of a mysterious patrimony and an orphan whose

surrogate parentage is contested for by the two major strands of the plot. At the same time, delving into Pip's growing consciousness of the criminal under class, *Great Expectations* maps out the territory of domestic criminality, fusing the commonplace with the Gothic in the manner of Sensation fiction, a genre that underwent spectacular growth in the 1860's.

The mystery plot of *Great Expectations* is therefore formed by the inheritance plot(s), and the doubling of the possible stories of Pip's inheritance — Magwitch on one side, Miss Havisham on the other — reflects to some degree the doubling of the double-narrative. There is a crime, or a secret, represented by Magwitch's acts, and there is a narrative of investigation and falsehood, the narrative that Pip initially takes to be true, though it is ultimately proved false, the narrative represented by Miss Havisham and her supposed benevolence. As always, there is a moment of discovery and retrospection, when Pip is forced to look backwards on the true course of events and re-evaluate all the clues that he has ignored up until now. I have examined this skein of clues and resemblances — repetitions, memories, intuitions and textual echoes — using the image of Estella's knitting, for Estella holds a unique position in the novel. The daughter of Abel Magwitch who becomes the adopted daughter of Miss Havisham is at the centre of a complex series of associations for Pip, the thread into his "poor labyrinth" (253). Though she is initially the inspiration of his fantasies of social advancement, Pip eventually learns that Estella's background is closely connected to the "taint of prison and crime" (284) that he has always resisted. His discovery and recognition of this fact, and his eventual confession to the dying Magwitch, marks Pip's growth into maturity

Detecting and understanding Estella's story, then, Pip also comes to trace out and understand the social relationships that form the guilty order in which he has become complicit. For the notion of a gentleman that underpins Pip's expectations and his education also motivates Magwitch's elaborate revenge plan, while at the centre of the novel's cycles of harm and vengeance is the remote evil of the "gentleman" Compeyson. The web of social relationships uncovered through Estella's skein of

clues reveals a social order tainted by guilt and exploitation. None knows this better than the initiate and lawyer, Jaggers, whose insight and power over the law mark him with an almost providential power to accuse and defend. Jaggers is also determined by the injustices and contradictions of the law, and his powers to protect are thus circumscribed. When Pip finally challenges Jaggers and Wemmick with his hard-won knowledge, we see that this disturbs the balance of power between them. In their collective decision to maintain the secret of Estella's parentage, Pip becomes one of these urban men, complicit in the structure of secrecy and power. Jaggers, at least, is partly redeemed by his decision to rescue the child Estella, but it is only when Pip selflessly reveals to Magwitch Estella's identity and his love for her that we know that Pip has obtained a greater ethical standing than the lawyer. This comes after the adventure plot, in which Pip strives to get Magwitch out of England and away from the danger represented by Compeyson. Through the intense suspense and emotion of this plot, through Pip's alienation from home and stability, we see how his growing understanding is matched by his developing compassion for Magwitch.

Great Expectations is still concerned with the individual and society, the nature of the law, the nature of identity, inheritance and guilt, but it demonstrates how far Dickens has moved from playing out these mysteries in the context of specifically urban institutions, as he did in *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*. Here, he is more and more interested in tracing these mysteries in the actions and consciousnesses of his characters. In *Our Mutual Friend* he would return, for the last time, to the lengthy serialised format of these earlier novels, but his treatment of the mystery plot would demonstrate a remarkable breadth and multiplicity, and a curious bifurcation.

8.6. *Our Mutual Friend*; Mr Inspector and the City.

Our Mutual Friend reverts to the extended urban form of *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*, creating the familiar sense of a comprehensive exploration of a whole society, the broad connectedness evident in *Bleak House*. In its description of a series of urban

spheres it displays the city of London but also enforces a strong sense of dislocation between its various settings. Despite its emphatic social concerns, *Our Mutual Friend* has no court of Chancery or Circumlocution Office with which to localise these, or its mysteries, and though the novel does begin with a well-defined enigma, the Harmon mystery, it is given to a certain narrative diffusion, a fluid dispersal of effects, that I have called the propagation of mystery. Naturally, in all multi-plot novels there is this sense of propagation, for example, in the developing circles of investigation into Lady Dedlock's secret, but in *Our Mutual Friend* this phenomenon is particularly exaggerated.

Our Mutual Friend begins with the corpse, the unidentified body, and this is a realised mystery. Yet as the plot develops it divides, giving rise to complicated new plots, while the Harmon mystery itself is prematurely "solved" through John Harmon's narrative before half the novel is read. Yet it is possible to see the interplay between the plot and the analogical structures of the novel, a densely textured relationship that is already recognisable to us, especially from our reading of *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*. Initially, the anonymous corpse can be linked to the urban mystery of *Our Mutual Friend*, for the body, which leaves no clues, indicates the problem of identity in a commercial society, a society in which real values are lost or obscured by the enigmatic mysteries of vacuity represented by characters such as the Veneerings. In the urban, speculative economy human identity becomes as much a commodity as dust, and characters tend to disguise and distort their own selves. Thus, the mysteries that disperse, or give rise to new plots, portray a society in which identities tend to dispersal and uncertainty, in which personal value tends to be determined by commerce, paperwork, shares, illusions, mere nominal surfaces. From *Bleak House* to *Little Dorrit*, Dickens has expressed this ambivalence about documentation, through the delays of Chancery and the Circumlocution Office, through the power of shares and notes to make value out of nothingness, people out of paper. What is personal, then, is institutional — and semiotic. The Harmon mystery that initiates *Our Mutual Friend* represents John Harmon's search, through the mysteries of his inheritance, for some

means with which to strike a balance with the reifying mysteries of an urban culture. Taking control of the mystery of his personal identity by posing as John Rokesmith, Harmon renegotiates his relationship with his grandfather's legacy. Mr Inspector's failed attempt to arrest John Harmon for his own murder discharges those anxieties raised by this strand of the mystery plot.

Our Mutual Friend develops another mystery plot, however, a mystery that branches out even as the Harmon plot is foremost in our attention. In the struggle between Eugene Wrayburn and Bradley Headstone we note a new inflection and complexity in Dickens's presentation of mystery, in a plot concerned with psychological pressure and violence. Yet this plot also reverts to Dickens's old preoccupation with providence and providential design, God's mysterious foresight, as it shows how the plotting of the would-be murderer is resisted and confined by the greater providential force, the force represented through the River Thames as the liminal site of examination and transformation. Yet even this providential resolution is set in the troubling context of violence and crime. Thus, *Our Mutual Friend*, through its narrative propagation, develops two mysteries: one that tends, through the process of analogy, to examine the problems and stresses of inheritance, commerce and urban life; and another that turns inwards, through psychology and desire, and yet resolves itself providentially. It is the second psychological plot that is developed in Dickens's last, unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

8.7. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*: The Murderer and the Detectives.

Edwin Drood is the first of Dickens's mystery novels to virtually abandon his urban subject, and, in its subtle shift from the novel of urban mysteries to its pursuit of a singular mystery, indicates the first definitive step in the movement towards detective fiction, in which the logical examination and exposure of a single crime was to become the genre's entire subject within a field closely circumscribed by the rules of interaction between reader and writer. *Edwin Drood* foregrounds the dark secrets of the mind of

the assumed murderer, Jasper. This is partly a reversion to those mysteries of the mind already found in the other novels in this study, but also a new development, Dickens's difficult "new idea," (qtd. in Forsyte, *Decoding* 28) only hinted at by the character of Bradley Headstone in *Our Mutual Friend*. *Edwin Drood*, in this sense, does not explore those common mysteries of personality which surround even those nearest to us, but, as I have argued, deals in the mysteries of the criminal mind, a "horrible wonder apart" (233), not subject to our ordinary understanding of psychological process. John Jasper is partly the distorted projection of the stifling social order of Cloisterham. Dickens's presentation of the divided mind of John Jasper is extraordinarily complex, demonstrating the inner dynamic of a man who is both kinsman and killer, respectable professional and outcast, always in some way conscious of himself, and yet in other ways desperate to be other than himself.

This psychological complexity is, however, developed through the complexity of the mystery plot, since the mystery demands of us, if nothing else, the closest attention to the clues, the nearest possible reading of all of the murderer's gestures, which reveal always something of his turbulent interiority. And yet the plot is also a providential plot, expressing the certainty that despite his plotting, providence will defeat John Jasper and guide him back to penitence and self-realisation. Thus, as Edwin's body is recovered from the Sapsea tomb, truth itself may be rediscovered in the precincts of the Cathedral. Disturbingly, then, the ring that seals a case of murder might also represent a recovery of spiritual truth in the shadow of the Cathedral. This is the closest Dickens approaches to an institutional critique in *Edwin Drood*. Though the Cathedral is significant as setting, it is not an object of institutional mystery, as Chancery and the Circumlocution Office are. While the Cathedral hierarchy imposes its pressures on John Jasper, the effect is one of psychological mystery. Even the relatively dispersed sense of urban mystery in *Our Mutual Friend* is absent. The Cathedral is, indeed, the scene of a mystery, but the solution is unlocked through Jasper, not the institution.

Naturally, part of this discussion is speculative, since *Edwin Drood* remains incomplete, and this reading can only assume that Jasper is the killer, or indeed, that Edwin Drood is dead. Other "Droodist" critics of the novel have proposed different scenarios, dissatisfied with the simplicity of this one, unwilling to believe that the obvious solution is sufficiently mysterious. However, if this study has achieved anything, it will show how misplaced this criticism is, attempting to retrospectively force on Dickens the highly codified conventions of detective fiction without acknowledging the mysteries tradition that Dickens had worked with at least since *Bleak House*. Eager always to create interest in the reader — possibly this is what would have drawn him to construct *Edwin Drood* as it is — Dickens nevertheless preferred the suspense of suggestion over that of concealment, and would have rejected the over-elaboration of the Drood plot as being purely mechanical. Instead, we must look for the deeper, suggestive mystery, not the elaborate gesture of concealment. In this case the metaphysical mystery is in the strangely divided mind of John Jasper. In the strength of the construction of its double-narrative, *Edwin Drood* makes its strongest claim on the status of detective fiction. Droodism points, however, to the strength and fascination of Dickens's mystery plots, their power to draw us into the expansive, speculative, dilatory territory of the text. This is the function of the double-narrative, a narrative felt so forcefully that even though *Edwin Drood* is unfinished, we can feel that it is complete, that the narrative of the crime is submerged there in the partial narrative of the investigation, requiring only a sort of surpassing act of perception to make it reveal itself. This is not permissible. *Edwin Drood* must remain unfinished, suggestive, permanently mysterious in the profoundest sense.

8.8. Dickens and Mystery.

Every writer must be conscious of mystery, enigma, the unknown. Dickens, whose creative powers were inspired by observation and most prominently expressed in description, must have been acutely aware of mystery in the city streets through

which he so often roamed, and in the houses which he passed. This is reflected and dramatised in the narrator's speculation in *A Tale of Two Cities*: "A solemn consideration, when I enter a great city at night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret; that every beating heart in the hundreds of thousands of breasts there, is, in some of its imaginings, a secret to the heart nearest it!" (44). Urban growth and the tremendous material, intellectual and cultural changes of the Victorian era, may have indeed led to what Peter Brooks describes as the "enormous narrative production" (6) of that age. These productions, within their particular contexts and fashions, include the Newgate novel, the Gothic, the Sensation novel, and, of particular importance here, the novel of urban mysteries, and, ultimately, detective fiction. Dickens, the grand synthesiser of popular culture and literature, can be shown as navigating a course among all these influences, moving from his urban and domestic mysteries into the enigmas of the mind and personality. Why these urgent mysteries, we might ask, and why this fascination with the criminal, the hidden and the secretive? As the Victorian age groped from the medieval to the modern, as part of an extended process that it is not the aim of this study to describe, something of the certainty of the age-old representation of God as centre and figure of mystery slipped away. While for some God had disappeared, those who still worked within the tradition of the providential aesthetic had to admit that God was no longer fully visible, and His representation became, accordingly, one of brief glimpses of an immanent order underlying an obscuring material reality. In His place, though never as a definitive erasure, came the plurality of mysteries, displacing the ineffable mystery of Providence, through a process of secularisation. Though Dickens never gave up his firm faith and thus his interest in providential plots and poetic (divine) justice, his mysteries shared their attention between providence and the baffling complexities of everyday life, generating this tension, especially in his later works, between eternal order and the diffusion of sensory phenomena. God, once the singular object and actor of mystery, now shares the stage with the city, its inhabitants and its institutions, in all of their baffling particularities. Dickens sought to construct and investigate these

mysteries. The process of secularisation and substitution gives us narrative, mysteries that can be enacted and thereby in some way artistically understood, mysteries that arose out of the anxieties generated by his era: mysteries of the city, domestic mysteries, mysteries of wealth, inheritance and crime, mysteries of the law and administration, mysteries of personal identity. The writer's engagement with mystery, then, leads to narrative, and the narrative of mystery itself is a double-narrative, in which the fictional dilatory territory of the text is determined by that gap between crime and discovery, enigma and understanding, words and interpretation.

How is the novel of mysteries constructed? I have used the notion of the labyrinth to describe a degree of complexity that may be most fully accounted for by comparison with the hypertext. The Dickens novel demonstrates the rich relationships between its parts: the structures of analogy in *Bleak House*, *Our Mutual Friend* and *Little Dorrit* that trace the interconnections of the world, creating a kind of verbal and symbolic maze that connects and counterpoints imaginatively the disparate parts and persons of the text, or the skein of clues of *Great Expectations*, that similarly shows a text knitted together by knots of resemblance and parallelism. This is evident also in the complexity of the multi-plot novel. The plot, of course, is motivated by the mystery and the tension of the double-narrative that opens up a certain domain of suspense, speculation and temporary uncertainty that I have called the dilatory territory of the text. Through the plot comes the notion of the thread, the only line that guides us through the labyrinth and orientates us within its confusion. In the novel of urban mysteries, the thread is often a multiple thread, leading into densely interwoven or dispersing mysteries: the kindred mysteries of *Bleak House*, or the propagating mysteries of *Our Mutual Friend.*

How, then, is the city constructed in the novel of urban mystery? Dickens's knowledge and observation allowed him to describe the streets, courtyards and alleys of the city, its bridges and thoroughfares and markets, with exactness. The text that is potentially a labyrinth is a matrix in which the city presents itself as labyrinth. We can see this in the foggy confusion of *Bleak House*, or the endless streets of *Little Dorrit*,

or the meandering thoroughfares of *Our Mutual Friend* and the dockside of *Great Expectations*. The maze expresses both the architectural complexity of the city, its baffling perspectives, its vistas and restless movement, and also its mysteriousness, the sense that it somehow conceals and contains unseen fears as well as wonders. Within the maze of the city, then, are also its dreadful enclosures, and threatening places — Limehouse Hole, Tom-All-Alone's, Little Britain — where characters quest towards their encounter with potentially transforming knowledge.

How is the city administered? Through those institutions that already begin to partake of its mysteriousness and opacity: through Chancery, or the Circumlocution Office, through the mysteries of the law that Jaggers represents, and through the mysteries of the urban new-rich, who construct paper wealth out of a nominal currency, speculation, paper. In their abuses and their fraudulence, these institutions take a particular place in Dickens's representation of mystery through the novel. Yet as Dickens's mystery technique changed, the institution became less definitive, more and more an order sensed rather than localised in a given office or authority. Chancery and the Circumlocution Office exert a fearful symbolic influence, but they are still fundamentally places. From then on, institutions become less definitive, as though the dispersal of authority Anne Humpherys describes becomes startlingly acute, until in *Great Expectations* we find that society itself is founded on a guilty order, and*Our Mutual Friend* outlines a vacuous culture in which all persons are reduced to mere commodities. In *Edwin Drood* the shift is virtually complete. Jasper is as he is because of the stifling, ecclesiastical society of Cloisterham and the Cathedral, but we only understand this through the medium of his divided mind. That *Edwin Drood* is set primarily outside of London indicates the totality of this shift. There have always been rural scenes in Dickens's novels, notably the marshes of *Great Expectations* or the upper Thames of *Our Mutual Friend*, and though it is not within the scope of what I have done to explore the tension between the urban and rural in Dickens's work, we note that up until *Our Mutual Friend* the city of London is always dominant, that whether the characters flee or return to the great city, it is the site that their actions are

defined against. Though the rural world is a kind of retreat for Esther and Allan at the end of *Bleak House*, the suppressed violence of Cloisterham hints that no such refuge is still viable. The "everlastingly green garden" (258) of temporary escape in *Edwin Drood* is an imaginative fantasy despite its actual location in the upper reaches of the Thames, a dream-place "left for everlasting, unregainable and far away" (258) distinct from both "the great black city" (258) and the realities of Cloisterham. In *Edwin Drood* it is the inward condition that must be confronted, not the environment.

Who inhabits the labyrinth of the mysterious text? I have termed a certain order of Dickensian character the initiates, connecting them with the ancient role of the priest-interpreter of God's mystery and the guild master. The locus of the initiates' status and power is secret knowledge, in the broadest possible sense, that allows the initiates to assert their mastery over the city and society. The curious paradox of the initiates' position is that knowledge is predicated on secrecy, and the force of their insight is dependent on the unutterability of their truth. Thus, the initiate, from Mr Bucket to Tulkinghorn, Jaggers and Mrs Clennam, is always an ambiguous figure, partly determined by the contradiction of the mysteries that they oversee. Does the writer, or the omniscience of the narrator, share in this tension between authority and insight? Beside the initiate and the mastery of the detective, we might place Dickens's Asmodean fantasy, in its desire to investigate and expose the shadows of domestic secrecy. This may be the kind of stress that led to Dickens's close analysis of the role of the Revolutionary Tribunal in *A Tale of Two Cities*, his efforts always to reconstitute mystery even as knowledge approached it, and his construction of another kind of sometimes sympathetic observer that I have called the acolyte, or the acolyte detective.

The acolyte, unlike the initiate, does not know immediately, and cannot close perceptually with the mystery, but must learn, trace, explore, investigate, and thereby move in those labyrinths suggested by the text. The acolyte shares in the initiate's will to knowledge, like Arthur Clennam in his suspicions and Pip in his careful re-examination of the fabric of his life and delusions. While reading, the reader is in a position analogous to that of the acolyte: both reader and acolyte move towards greater

understanding in the dilatory territory of the text, always the subject of a broader, unrevealed knowledge. Reading, collating, interpreting the text, the reader is educated in those modes of understanding that resist the deadening categories of the initiate. As in *Bleak House*, the most textual of all of Dickens's mysteries, we are required to read with imagination and sympathy if we are to understand at all. The poetic insight that threads together clues and connections in the rich hypertext of *Bleak House* is the kind of knowledge we are led towards. And yet the acolyte detective often fails, or finds only a partial truth, while reading must also admit of incomplete solutions, for Dickens's mysteries are never entirely dispelled by the detective's search, never entirely revealed or dissected.

This resistance of mystery to complete exposure has many sources. Reading is dependent on mystery, on the Scheherazadean dilemma of story-telling, on the ongoing creation of that "syntagmatic gap" that adheres between each sign and its inclusion in a totalising understanding, in the suspense entailed by every incomplete act of comprehension. Dickens's texts retain their openness partly out of this sense that the world can be known but never entirely known, and, as it would seem in his dark novels from *Bleak House* onwards, also out of Dickens's growing tragic vision of the limits of human consciousness and control, and out of his ultimate reservation as to the perfectibility of our knowledge. This belief in the limits of our present knowledge can be connected to Dickens's intense religious sentiment as well as secular doubt. As the providential moment became one of hard-won insight into obscurity rather than self-evident perception, we see Dickens's belief that it is only the life beyond that clarifies, only the Providential deity that judges with perfect understanding. This faith, of course, returns us to the earliest sense of mystery, knowledge of God, the one mystery that can only ever be strictly expressed as mystery, as wonder. Yet the mystery of the secular city also remains irreducible, baffling and attractive. Thus, the Dickensian mystery, the metaphysical mystery that I have argued is always located within or behind those mechanical or empirical mysteries that can be rendered as knowledges, always persists, just as the flourishes of the Dickensian textual labyrinths offer us

virtually infinite iterations, even as our reading always follows strangely coherent, but never entirely identical, paths. The emotional and intellectual richness this affords us, points to something of the power of Dickens's artistry, and his concern for that quality of sincere interest that was the key to his relationship and popularity with his tremendous audience.

Grahame Smith has argued that even if Dickens the populist producer of commercial consumerist texts and Dickens the creative artist are conceived of as operating on different functional levels, these levels are nevertheless in some way fundamentally fused (159). If anything, this study has been a detailed attempt to trace out the results of that fusion, to show by an act of synthesis that Dickens's mystery, suspense and adventure plots are not aspects of his achievement separate from his complex thematic and artistic concerns. Where ideas of the construction of a mystery or detection plot, or adventure, would have been traditionally subordinated in criticism to considerations such as symbolism, theme or formal structure, my position is that the former equally merit attention, and, in fact, are intimately combined with the latter. The act of imagining may be best understood as the intense creative integration of all the dispersed elements of observation and culture. I hope that this may be a reflection of Dickens's own desire as a writer, to see the relationship of the finer threads to the whole.

The end of a work of detection or mystery is always an act of recovery. Esther, Arthur Clennam, Pip and John Harmon all learn that we work backwards in order to determine where we have arrived, as the mystery text strives to recover what Todorov calls the "absolute and absent cause" (45). When I began, I had a notion of a productive application of ideas of detection and detective narrative to Dickens's text. This led me to frame this study with Dickens's two novels that were closest in structure to detective fiction: *Bleak House* and *Edwin Drood.* But, further reading indicated that I would have to, after a fashion, recover Dickens from detection. I have untangled the notions of detection and Victorian mystery to show that Dickens is not, in fact, a bungler in a genre that was only partially formed, but working within a framework of

mystery that did not have the same strict generic rules as the detective fiction that followed on from it. *Bleak House*, the first text that is significant in relation to Dickens and detective fiction, is also a mystery text. Recovering the idea of mystery as prior to detection, then, uncovers a mediating space in which the novel of urban mysteries and Sensation fiction navigate the transition between the Newgate novel and early detective fiction. Dickens's work demonstrates its place within this movement. Though Dickens's mystery texts are strongly influenced by the novel of urban mysteries, particularly in the mid-fifties — to the extent that *Bleak House* is an exemplary urban mystery — this is only a pronounced aspect of his work in mystery. The genres with which I have linked Dickens's texts are only guides, not exclusive categories.

Having shown, then, that *Bleak House* and *Edwin Drood* were not unique as precursors to a future genre but part of a tradition, I had also to recover impulses and transformations that were at work in mystery as it applied to those novels falling between *Bleak House* and *Edwin Drood.* The urban institution, which represents the clearest apprehension of urban mystery, dominates the two earliest texts, *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*, but the sense of the institution becomes increasingly diffuse as Dickens progressed, and human and corporate agency was more and more related to mysteries of psychology and personal knowledge. Dickensian mystery is no longer locatable in the evils of identifiable administrations, such as Chancery, but dispersed through the whole structure of social relationships, as it is through the mysteries of vacuity and identity in *Our Mutual Friend.* This transition suggests something of the movement from the novel of urban mysteries through Sensation fiction to the nascent detective story, from the dispersed kindred mysteries of *Bleak House* to the singular disappearance and murder of *Edwin Drood.* Yet I want to emphasise here that a close reading will always identify exceptions, and that this movement between genres is not to be construed in terms of seamless development and regression. *Bleak House* is dominated by Chancery, yet Chancery itself is both cause and symbol of a chaotic, entropic world. *Little Dorrit* resembles *Bleak House* strongly, but already its centre of balance persists somewhere between the Circumlocution Office, the prison — at once

the Marshalsea and the world — and the House of Clennam. And, while Dickens's plots are multiple plots in these novels, gaining more focus in shorter works such as *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations*, Dickens's last complete novel is still a reversion to the extended form, though it exhibits this tension between urban diffusion and psychological coherence in its bifurcating plot. Furthermore, Dickens is both precursor of the genre of detective fiction and yet finally distinct from what became of detection, for those elaborate rules and comfortable solutions that came to exemplify detective fiction from Sherlock Holmes onwards do not fit with any consistency with Dickens's work. At the time of his death, mystery was a long-familiar element of Dickens's compositional method. Yet when completed, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* would have been more than a feat of design, no simple matter of arranging all the mechanical parts in the right place, but a severe contemplation of the nature of good and evil in modern man. It may be that those very anxieties which gave rise to the novel of urban mysteries and detective fiction became so acute that they demanded easy palliatives, the closed, certain solution, where the arrival of the law is also the resumption of moral order and ethical clarity, but for Dickens mystery was to be cherished as much as exposed.

Dickensian mystery, be it the mystery of the urban environment or of personal origins, resists final explication, and this resistance allows the production of new narratives, a new exercise for the imagination. What is recovered, then, is a sense that mystery, traditionally relegated to its position as precursor to a popular genre or questions of mechanical plotting, is an innate part of Dickens's achievement as an artist. Mystery informs and drives his novels, inviting the reader to interpret, to learn, to wonder. That which brings us at any one time to read, the particularity of our encounter with the text in our immediate responses, is the absent yet absolute cause that is rarely spoken of in criticism, since it is not found in interpretative generalisations but in the experience of fiction itself. But it is the very reason we took the book from the shelf, and went on to turn its pages and enter into its world. What we recover at the

very end is the mystery of reading itself, that initial impulse, that total commitment to the imagined world, that first drew us to reading Dickens.

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